Abstraction and Fiction
Reading the 'Double Vision' of Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores abstraction in the writing of Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf. It argues that the "abstract", a familiar concept in the visual arts, is also invaluable for reading certain aesthetic innovations in Modernist fiction.

The scientific and philosophical discoveries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had a profound impact upon concepts of truth and reality. The dualism that had dominated western philosophy for centuries was deeply undermined by various intellectual advances: relativity and uncertainty reigned in the stead of balanced, absolute opposites. The abstract experimentation of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf is deeply entrenched in the contemporary crisis of dualism. Each of these authors appropriates and reimagines a traditional, philosophical dualism in order to add another, expansive dimension to familiar and descriptive language. The manifestations of abstraction in their fiction varies greatly: ranging from the use of geometric, abstract images, to the invocation of related abstract concepts, like negativity and ineffability. Despite the diversity of form, each of these abstractions depends upon a conceptual dualism, between the concrete and metaphysical, visible and invisible.

Embattled dualisms pervade the novels examined here: Conrad's *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Lord Jim* and *The Secret Agent*; Forster's *Maurice*, *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*; and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. The dualistic play of each of these authors proves crucial for expressing their fundamental vision. Conrad's alliance of irreconcilable antagonisms structures a perpetual tension and stalemate, effecting something of his pessimism and horror at the fundamental senselessness of existence. Whereas Forster's abstractions promote his more optimistic outlook. The interminable oscillation between opposites in his writing is a source of truth, rather than an admission of a fundamental ignorance. Forster's dualisms are a stimulus for connection, realising his central ethos – 'only connect' – in the very aesthetics of his literature. For Woolf, abstraction helped her overcome the fundamental problem facing the artist: the struggle to find an image to convey what s/he means. Woolf's abstraction translates the metaphysical vision of the artist into a concrete image: it reconciles vision with design. By reading the metaphysical dimension of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf's 'double vision' as abstract, we can appreciate their stylistic innovations as strategies for responding to and realising shifting concepts of reality.

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INTRODUCTION

I

We don't tend to think of fiction as abstract. The sense of a novel depends too much upon the provision of information and the representation of the familiar. We have no problem discussing the abstract quality of music, visual art, and (to some extent) poetry, because these forms of expression are not strictly bound to conventional signs and systems of representation. They don't depend upon imitating or copying reality for their effect, and are free to innovate a form of communication outside the bounds of familiar forms.[1] It follows, then, that there is an abundance of theory and criticism engaging with the abstraction of music, art, and poetry, and hardly any that focuses on abstraction in fiction.[2] But this explanation only holds up if we understand the abstract in singular, fixed terms. In this thesis, I show that such a singular vision of abstraction is utterly at odds with early-twentieth-century thinking and fiction.

We think we know what we mean when we talk of something as 'abstract'. If speaking of the concept of abstraction, we think of it as opposed to the concrete object, as having no physical or tangible existence. If extending that concept to visual abstraction, then the tendency is to assume that abstract form is devoid of any reference to the visible, familiar world. In 1958, Monroe C. Beardsley wrote that '"abstract" is the converse of "realistic"', explaining that 'to say that *A* is a more abstract representation than *B* is the same as to say that *B* is more realistic

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[1] In *The Poet's Third Eye: A Guide to Symbolisms of Modern Literature* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1976), Gordon E. Bigelow writes of the discrepancy between literature and other art forms in the move toward abstract, or "pure" representation: '[a]bstract expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock in the present century actually achieved "pure" painting with paint, canvas, style, and no subject matter. But in literary art this kind of "purity" is much more difficult, if not impossible, since words always carry some sign value, even if they are made-up words like "slithy toves" or "mimsy borogoves"' (p. 125).

[2] Aside from the criticism that has addressed the abstract quality of Modernist poetry, those that have looked at, for example, surrealist literature, various subjects of "unknowability" (negativity, ineffability, and such like), Post-Impressionism and its relationship to writing, have, in their own ways, treated aspects of the abstract in relation to literature. There are branches of criticism, then, that have ventured toward this topic. The subject of abstraction – in both the aesthetic and conceptual sense – is rarely (if ever) confronted and made the subject of discussion in relation to fiction, however.

than *A*.'[3] On the basis of this generally accepted definition, Beardsley has, as we might, assumed unequivocally that the abstract – in its non-concrete, non-mimetic state – must be the opposite of the real.[4] Even a cursory glance over the vast amounts of literature written on the abstract art movement – by the artists, theorists, art critics, historians – shatters the singularity of this definition, and challenges Beardsley's separation of the abstract from the real. Abstract art, for one, is not exclusively non-representational. As Richard Brinkmann points out, '"abstract" is the general term, "representational" and "non-representational" are particular terms.'[5] The body of works that qualify as 'abstract' attest to the fact that abstraction is not necessarily non-mimetic. When Brinkmann says that '"non-representational" is one possible manifestation of the abstract', he rightly indicates that the concept of abstraction (in visual culture, at least) is not limited to a single manifestation or form (p. 11).[6] Early twentieth-century abstract art – in all its forms – was supported and "explained" by a wealth of theoretical literature, mostly authored by the artists themselves. Of course theories differed, but one recurrent claim across artists was that abstraction was "more real" than conventional, "realist" modes of representation. Abstract art, then, doesn't necessarily fit our assumed definition or Beardsley's binary model. In its various manifestations and concepts its definition is plural, and its form, undetermined.

A fixed and limited assumption of abstraction as non-mimetic, non-concrete, and anti-realistic makes it virtually impossible to detect in the necessarily referential language of literature. But if we extend our appreciation of the rich variety and manifestation of abstraction in visual culture (as we have already done in the context of poetry) to a reading of early twentieth-century fiction, then we

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[3] Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), p. 286.

[4] In 'Two Cheers for Abstraction: Streams of Sound in *Prometheus Unbound*', in *Symbolism: An International Journal of Critical Aesthetics* (New York: AMS Press, 2000), 193 – 210, David Kaufmann notes that abstraction tends to be seen as 'the enemy of either sense or life', thus reiterating Beardsley's and the general assumption that abstraction is opposite to the realistic, the familiar (p. 195).

[5] Richard Brinkmann, 'Abstract Lyrics of Expressionism: End or Transformation of the Symbol?', in *Literary Symbolism: A Symposium*, ed. and introd. by Helmut Rehder (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), pp. 109 – 136 (p. 111).

[6] Note that after a full reference to a text has been given in the footnote, subsequent references to that text will appear in parenthesis after the end of the quotation(s) in the body of the thesis.

can begin to appreciate the hitherto disregarded abstract quality of some of this writing.

The aesthetics of Modernist literature have, of course, been likened to those of certain abstract art movements. There is a proliferation of material, for instance, comparing aspects of Virginia Woolf's writing to the cubist aesthetic. But likening a writer's style to that of an abstract painting is not the same as identifying that writer's aesthetic as abstract in its own right. For one, this makes the assumption that abstraction is primarily an aesthetic phenomenon. As the theoretics that drive the abstract art movement evidence, however, aesthetic abstraction goes hand in hand with philosophical and existential concerns. Most frequently, an artist's abstract style is born out of his/her particular vision of reality. The scientific discoveries and philosophical developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had a profound impact upon concepts of reality. The notion of "Truth" as absolute was deeply undermined and conventional structures of meaning were destabilised. Mimetic representation was no longer deemed the most accurate or true representation of reality, and artists sought to find new ways to speak of their shifting sense of "reality" and "truth". To draw connections then between Modernist writing and abstract art purely on the basis of a shared aesthetic is to potentially relegate the writer's own vision of reality to that of the abstract artist's. Whilst abstract art provides a crucial model for reading the abstraction of early twentieth-century fiction, I argue that the abstract quality of this writing needs to be apprehended and appreciated in its own right: as a response to shifting concepts of truth and reality.

Defining the 'abstract' is difficult. This is especially true in the context of the early twentieth century, where shifting concepts and aesthetics were constantly challenging and redefining the situation, manifestation, and significance of the 'abstract'.[7] The artists we have classified as 'abstract' shared no consensus over

[7] In her book *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), Briony Fer discusses the issues associated with the term 'abstract'. 'As a label', she writes, 'the term "abstract" is on the one hand too all-inclusive: it covers a diversity of art and different historical moments that really hold nothing in common except a refusal to figure objects. On the other hand, "abstract" is too exclusive, imagining a world of family resemblances […] which is hermetically sealed from a world of representation outside it.' Fer acquiesces, however, saying that '[a]s a label it will have to do,

form, definition, or even term. Their works sprawl across a spectrum of abstraction, ranging from familiar objects represented in a defamiliarised way (the cubists, for instance), to the total non-representation of geometric abstraction (i.e. Mondrian or Malevich). Some called abstract painting 'concrete' (Arp and Kandinsky), others, 'non-figurative' (Mondrian), whilst the Guggenheim Foundation settled on 'non-objective.' There was no consensus over what abstraction achieved or communicated as an art form. Some thought of it as an assertion of the absolute in the face of flux (Mondrian, for instance), for others though (Gleizes and Metzinger, for example) it was an active denial of the absolute, whilst some (like Kandinsky) saw it as a means of penetrating to and experiencing a spiritual, ineffable beyond.

Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* filtered into British culture via T. E. Hulme's lecture series in 1913 – 14. Worringer's definition of abstraction sets a standard against which we can measure the shifting concepts and diverse aesthetics of abstract practitioners. Like Beardsley after him, Worringer sets the abstract at a polar end of a binary structure, the opposite of which he terms empathy. The urge to empathy is the mark of a civilised culture, whereas the urge to abstraction 'stands at the beginning of every art'; it is primitive.[8] Worringer's definition of abstraction situates him within concurrent Modernist discourse. He suggests that an individual faced with the incomprehensible flux of his existence might revert to this primitive, abstract form as a means of escaping the world of appearances. He describes this individual as 'so lost and spiritually helpless amidst the things of the external world', that 'he experiences only obscurity and caprice in the interconnection and flux of the phenomena of the external world' and, consequently, turns to abstraction as a means of purging the 'things of the external world of their caprice and obscurity in the world-picture and

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because it is a current term in common use, with its own vicissitudes and history, which stands for a type of art which does not allow us to interpret it with reference to what is depicted, as a figure painting or a still life might' (p. 5). Here, however, I demonstrate that a broad understanding of the 'abstract' allows for greater appreciation – not only of abstraction in fiction – but of the engagement of each of these authors with various parallel concepts, like metaphysics, negativity, ineffability, and so on.

[8] Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, 1908, trans. by Michael Bullock (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, repr. 1980), p. 15.

to impart to them a value of necessity and a value of regularity' (p. 18). Abstraction is a means of pulling order from the chaos, of contriving something absolute in the face of the relative. The most powerful urge of these 'lost' individuals was 'to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its *absolute* value' (author's emphasis, pp. 16 – 17).

Worringer not only limits abstraction to a singular definition, he defines abstraction as a limitation. To him, abstraction is a process of ordering and reduction, of purification and absolutism. It is an escape from the caprice and chaos of the external world to an irrefragable, determined form. In a sense, abstraction offers stasis and fixity in the face of flux and indeterminacy. My definition of abstraction is at odds with Worringer's. I argue that Conrad, Forster, and Woolf appeal to abstract concepts and abstract designs in an attempt to expand beyond conventional limitations. Abstraction is not an escape, nor is it a limitation. It is, for these authors at least, a strategy for confronting and responding to modern anxieties and so, in this sense, it is hardly a regression to primitivism, but a sophistication, an innovation.

There is one aspect of Worringer's definition of abstraction, however, which is fundamental to the figuration of the abstract in fiction: his dualistic model. Worringer depends upon binary opposites for his definition – primitive versus civilised; order versus chaos; abstraction versus empathy – and, whilst we must reject his particular selection of binaries, we must subscribe to a dualistic model if we are to properly apprehend and define abstraction in the fiction of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf.

Other writers in the period might be thought of as abstract. Some, Gertrude Stein for instance, are inherently more abstract than those looked at here. They engineer a style of writing that veers as closely to total abstraction as possible. Their prose is more poetic and atmospheric than it is referential or informative. They subvert conventional modes of communication to such an extreme that their writing is more readily experienced than it is rationally

understood. There are certainly elements and instances of this extreme type of abstraction in the writing of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf, but unlike the likes of Stein, these three authors use abstraction within a dualistic frame, setting it against a more conventional, familiar mode of representation. It is on the basis of this dualism, of an abstract aesthetic in conjunction with a familiar, more conventional aesthetic, that I have selected these authors. Situated within a dualistic frame, the abstract aesthetic innovations of these three authors demand to be read in association with concurrent philosophical issues.

Much of the modern anxiety derived from what we might think of as a crisis of dualism. The metaphysical aspect of the traditional dualistic vision of existence was deeply undermined by various advances in science and philosophy. The notion of fundamental absolutes was challenged, and in the new monistic vision, relativity and uncertainty reigned in the stead of balanced, determinate opposites. As E. M. Forster complained, 'the heavens and the earth have become terribly alike since Einstein.'[9] I explore the compromise of dualism at length in my first chapter, and demonstrate that the modern urge toward abstraction is rooted in the loss of dualism. Every novel looked at in this thesis is constructed according to various dualisms. For Conrad, Forster, and Woolf, literature provided a situation where dualism could not only be realised, but became crucial to their philosophical vision and aesthetic innovation. This double vision is how abstraction is figured and made manifest in the fiction of these authors. To recognise and interpret the abstract aspects of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf's writing, therefore, it is crucial that we do so within a dualistic frame.

Whilst it defies any singular definition and refuses to fix to any one form, we must have a precise concept of the abstract in mind if we are to identify it in fiction. Instead of Worringer's definition of the abstract as a limitation, we ought to apply to definitions that think of the abstract in plural, expansive terms.[10] In his

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[9] E. M. Forster, 'Art for Art's Sake', *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 1951 (Middlesex: Penguin, 1965, repr. 1970), pp. 96 - 103 (p. 99).

[10] Critics have, in other contexts (poetry and art, for example) been careful to maintain abstraction as a pluralising force, rather than limiting. David Kaufmann's 'Two Cheers for Abstraction', for instance, reads the abstraction of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in proliferating, rather than reductive, terms. He argues that 'to read the play as a failed political theory is to miss its express

discussion of abstract poetry, Richard Brinkmann's definition and means of identifying abstraction provides a useful model for thinking of abstraction in fiction. He says:

> a work of poetry is abstract when it does not adhere to the generally valid nexus of language, the grammatical and semantic framework of the poet's mother tongue, when it discards its selective system for a new medium of expression. Thus I call a work of poetry abstract when it creates, within the medium of its language, in the manner of joining and dividing, selection and organisation, a new structure of its own. […] In other words, abstract poetry aims at statements which, in any manner imaginable, express something different from the conventional system of language and more than it would permit (p. 112).

Broadly speaking, then, aspects of fiction might be called abstract if they defy 'the conventional system of language'. In Brinkmann's model of abstraction, conventional language is a limitation, and the abstract is an attempt to get beyond, to somehow communicate 'more'. With reference to one poem in particular, he says that 'what makes this little poem a treasure seems not to be at all rooted in its content, but in something "more", something beyond the margin of what everyone can say' (p. 113).

The abstract in fiction attempts to go beyond the conventional limitations of language. It challenges and overwhelms the parameters of familiar forms. It is transcendental and amorphous, expansive and intangible. Understood as essentially illimitable, we can see the necessity of breaking with the likes of Worringer's reductive definition. The expansive aims of abstract fiction aligns the concept of abstraction with various other concepts that "go beyond" conventional limitation, most significantly: the metaphysical, ineffable, unsaid, indeterminate, obscure, ambiguous, negative, and the mystical. To attempt to speak of these concepts, including the abstract, in any definite way is, of course, paradoxical, posing a challenge as much to this thesis as to the authors studied here. One

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intent. Rather, it is to be a vast compendium of hope. As such, it asks to be read negatively, as a cipher of what can come to be.' Not only does Kaufmann refuse to limit Shelley's abstraction to a singular interpretation ('a failed political theory'), he emphasises its proliferate potential for meaning ('hope') (p. 209).

cannot speak of the unspeakable. Thinking of the abstract in terms of these relative concepts, however, proves illuminating. I demonstrate that a full appreciation of the richness and multivalency of abstraction in fiction depends upon a reading of this concept in conjunction with these other essentially intangible concepts. In return, the abstract provides a language with which to newly apprehend and understand these parallel concepts.

II

Critics tend to attempt to demystify abstraction in fiction. They like to furnish these amorphous, unformulated aspects of the text with a final signified, a definite meaning. In part, this approach stems simply from the basic urge to make sense of things, to decode enigma, to discover hidden truth. More importantly, though, it extends from the failure to identify certain aspects of fiction as abstract. If we accept the definition of abstract as the attempt to go beyond conventional limitations, as an intangible, amorphous, "something more", then the critical practice of reduction and definition can be seen to be utterly at odds with the essence of the concept. A new methodology is required.

With this wealth of conceptual parallels – the metaphysical, ineffable, negative, and so on – come various templates and directives that can be appropriated for our identification and reading of abstraction in fiction. In *Languages of the Unsayable*, Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser argue that negativity (or the unsaid dimension of a text) is not intended as a void to be filled; it must not be defined by any positive assertion. In all its operations, 'it cannot be conceived as preparing the way for any substantialist idea or positivity […] it must be carefully discriminated from any ideological rupturings."[11] Rather, 'to evoke the multifariousness of negativity and to suggest how it can allow the unsayable to speak, negativity can only be described in terms of its *operations*, and not by any means in terms of a graspable entity' (author's emphasis, p. xii – xiii). All the

[11] *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (California: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. xii.

essays of that volume – authored by the likes of Jacques Derrida, Frank Kermode, and Jonathan Culler – 'refuse the consolidation of negativity into something that can be appropriated' (pp. xiv – xv). To appropriate negativity would be to give it positive assertion, thus undoing its negativity. We can and ought to extend this logic to the abstract. To say what an abstraction "means" would be to situate it within the bounds of conventionality, familiarity, and thus, to undo its very abstraction.

Iser repeatedly celebrates the indeterminate aspects of writing. In an essay called 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response', he suggests that 'the interpreter should in fact renounce his sanctified role of conveying meanings, if he wants to open up the possibilities of a text.'[12] This corresponds to Allon White's directive for reading obscurity. As with the abstract, critics tend to attempt to discover the "truth" behind literary obscurity. White argues that obscurity is not symptomatic of a 'hidden "problematic" or "subtext"', nor is it 'a matter of information supressed or omitted which the critic can patiently recover'.[13] Rather, 'Modernist difficulty signifies in and by the very act of offering resistance'; obscurity is used 'to produce new kinds of significance' (p. 16 and p. 17). White suggests that we ought to take obscurity for obscurity, not as the manifestation of some yet-to-be-uncovered subtext. Each of these critical approaches toward reading negativity, indeterminacy, and obscurity argues for the preservation of that concept, and argues against obliteration by explanation.[14] Rather than attempting to clarify the

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[12] Wolfgang Iser, 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction', in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. by J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 1 - 45 (p. 4).

[13] Allon White, *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 6 and p. 16.

[14] The work of various theorists "against interpretation" also provides a useful paradigm for approaching abstraction in fiction. In *A Theory of Literary Production*, 1966, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, repr. 1980), Pierre Macherey asserts that 'this idea of a hidden truth or meaning remains unproductive', and, in another parallel to White's and Iser's approach to textual ambiguity, states that 'we ought not to be weighing [the work] against an extrinsic or a concealed truth', rather, the 'work', or, in our case, the abstract, 'is itself and nothing else' (p. 98 and p. 38). In 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 3 - 14, Susan Sontag argues that 'the function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is,* even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*' (author's emphasis, p. 14). Parallels might also be found in Roland Barthes' discussion of the 'ideal text' in *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller, pref. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970, repr. 1974). He describes this as an 'absolutely plural text', and says that 'far from analysing it, we should rather

obscure aspects of Conrad's writing, or demystifying the mysterious aspects of Forster, or fixing Virginia Woolf's flux and formlessness to some definite meaning, I call these aspects abstract and preserve them as such.

Allon White defends his methodology by arguing that writers developed obscurity as a mechanism for deflecting interpretation, stating that 'the artist seeks to make his work opaque to the probing, subtle suggestion of the critic who attempts to see through the artifice' (p. 49). For this reason, we ought to maintain the obscurity of the artist's aesthetic. In other words, his approach is primarily founded upon a defence of aesthetics. Unlike White, however, my methodology is founded upon more than just an aesthetic preservation. My resistance to the idea of a 'hidden truth' is firmly situated in the early twentieth-century shifting concepts of reality and truth. Given that each of the authors examined here express doubt in the existence of absolute truth, their abstract expression demands to be considered not just as an aesthetic innovation, but also as a concept deeply rooted in philosophy. Throughout this thesis, I demonstrate that such a methodology crucially aligns the aesthetic innovation of abstraction with the conceptual re-evaluation of the abstract in philosophy.

The abstract in fiction demands to be read within a dualistic frame. A dualistic methodology is required: one that simultaneously accounts for abstract design and abstract concept; aesthetic innovation and philosophical vision. Both the subject and method of this thesis provides a structure for approaching the 'double vision' (to borrow Woolf's term) of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf. In recent criticism, Ann Banfield's *The Phantom Table* is an invaluable example of an approach that allows for simultaneous handling of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic innovation and philosophical vision. Banfield's dualistic model depends primarily on relating Woolf to Russell's philosophy and Fry's aesthetics. These two figures not only structure the philosophical/ aesthetic binary, but, within their own theoretical thinking, are preoccupied with various dualisms. Arguing, for instance,

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describe it through expansions, lexical transcendence, the generic word it continually attempts to join: the objects of semantics should be the synthesis of meanings, not the analysis of words' (p. 6 and pp. 92 – 3).

that Fry 'provides the link between Cambridge philosophy and visual art and aesthetics', Banfield continues:

> The resultant theory is dualistic, relating what Fry labels "vision" and "design", Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. It is a product of thinking which also gave rise to Moore's, Russell's and Whitehead's persisting dualism in which "the world of universals" coexists with "the world of existence". There are two realities, one sensible and the other inaccessible to the sense [...].[15]

Banfield firmly establishes her analysis of Woolf's dualism within the frame of corresponding dualisms in art and philosophical thought. In this contextual frame, the dualism of Woolf's fiction can be seen as 'an implicit theory of modern knowledge, divided, just as painting for Fry, into dual realities and dual ways of knowing' (p. 52). For Banfield, this dualism is roughly composed of a 'visual dimension' (p. 52) and an invisible dimension, or, as Woolf calls it, 'something unvisual beneath'.[16] It is these two dimensions – visible and invisible – that forge one of the most important dualisms in our understanding of abstract fiction. Banfield, however, limits her discussion of abstraction to 'the world of physics' and its (modern) preoccupation with invisible particles. She writes: 'the world that we can picture is the world that we see but the world of physics is an abstract world that cannot be seen' (p. 254). In her binary frame, then, abstraction is somewhat marginalised to the invisible world of particle physics. Though Banfield masterfully devises an approach that sustains and connects the dualism of Woolf's writing to the dualisms that characterise 'modern knowledge', she doesn't recognise abstraction as a force in this dualistic play. My task here is not only to identify certain aspects of early twentieth-century fiction as abstract, it is to establish the abstract as a strategy – a design – for manifesting the writer's philosophical vision.

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[15] Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 11 and p. 13.
[16] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, 1931 (London: Hogarth Press, 1946), p. 111.

In Chapter One, I survey the impact of late-nineteenth-century intellectual developments upon the traditional understanding of reality as dualist: composed of the phenomenal and the metaphysical. I demonstrate that scientific discoveries not only proved the fallibility of hitherto accepted truths, they replaced these truths with theories that proved the universe fundamentally uncertain, subjective, and, to a certain extent, unpredictable. As science rendered the metaphysical aspect untenable, "reality" and "truth" were conceptually dislocated and in need of resituating. I survey the various responses to this crisis of dualism, ranging from those who attempted to preserve a dualistic vision of reality, to those that embraced monism. I also illustrate the significant impact these shifting concepts of truth and reality had upon visual culture. I show that abstraction in art partly evolved as a strategy for responding to the intellectual undermining of metaphysics and the dislocation of "truth".

In the final section of this chapter, I illustrate the impact of a compromised dualism upon the concept of the abstract. My analysis of the usage of the term 'abstract' in early twentieth-century publications demonstrates a significant conceptual shift. Traditionally, the word 'abstract' denoted an idea, quality, or state as opposed to a concrete object. Its lack of concrete referent characterised it as metaphysical, associating it with "truth" and the "real". Abstract art maintained the association of the term abstract with concepts of "truth" and "reality". Crucially, however, by realising abstraction as something visual – perceivable and concrete – the traditional definition of abstraction as metaphysical was undermined. This etymological shift neatly illustrates an exchange of conventionally opposed binaries. Amidst the confusion generated by the crisis of dualism, then, an examination of the handling of the abstract is a means of gaining some clarity.

In my chapter on Joseph Conrad, I identify the main manifestations of the abstract in his writing as the obscurity of his description, his invocation of the metaphysical within the visible, the conflation of conventional opposites, and images of geometric shapes (in his later work). I suggest that his abstraction is closely related to the concept of ineffability.

Conrad subscribes to a dualistic vision in his writing, but, like an increasing number of philosophers and scientists of his time, refutes the notion of absolutes. Truth, for Conrad, is not situated in a metaphysical beyond: he relocates it, rather, in the phenomenal, visible world. In my reading of the sea in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, I show that Conrad infuses aspects of the visible world with a sense of the invisible, with a metaphysical quality. In my analysis of *Lord Jim*, I show how Conrad innovates another mode of abstract representation in his conflation of conventional opposites: public and private, fact and subjectivity, form and flux. His mergence and interchange of opposites challenges the understanding of meaning as fixed and limited. As well as undermining linguistic convention, these conflated binaries effect the relativity of his vision.

The muddying and merging of conventional boundaries and discourses effects something of the contemporary philosophical and scientific destabilisation of absolute truth, in exchange for theories of relativity, flux, and chaos. I demonstrate that Conrad's invocation of an abstract, ineffable dimension is a reaction to the destabilisation and undermining of systems of language and logic. The concept of the abstract and the ineffable, then, in his figuration, is in opposition to these rational systems of language and logic. By pushing the bounds of representation, Conrad conveys something of the complication, vexation, and mutability of man's experience of the anarchic, destabilised world.

In the final section of the chapter, I suggest that Conrad's use of one-dimensional geometric shapes in *The Secret Agent* aligns him with abstraction in visual culture. In these abstract shapes – the circle, the triangle – the metaphysical is somehow symbolically couched in the tangible. Though not dissimilar to his depiction of the sea in *The 'Narcissus'*, the significant difference here is the progression from the abstraction of the visible world to that of total abstract form.

In my chapter on Forster, I identify the main manifestations of abstraction as his invocation of the metaphysical against the perceptible, his use of repetition, negation, empty signifiers, and the musical quality of his writing. I suggest that the abstraction of *Maurice* relates to the concept of metaphysics, and in my

reading of *A Passage to India*, I align his abstraction with the concept of negativity.

Forster's vision is dualistic, veering between the clarity of the tangible and the incomprehensibility of the metaphysical. Virginia Woolf identified this 'double vision' as a flaw of his writing, as a wavering between the 'real and the symbolical', traditional realism and modern innovation.[17] Against this, I argue that rather than a product of indecision, Forster's double vision was a strategy for dealing with the scientific and philosophical compromise of dualism.

In my reading of *Maurice*, I show that Forster appropriates a conventional dualistic model to speak of the unspeakable, to articulate and overcome the impossibility of homosexuality in the context of Edwardian society. The metaphysical aspect - characterised by darkness, fantasy, abstraction – is free from the limitations of the visible, public aspect and, in its very formlessness, provides a context within which Maurice can realise his true self. In this novel, then, the metaphysical is the realm of truth, of the real. In *Howards End*, the double vision effected by Forster's subscription to both a realist and an abstract aesthetic is implicitly debated in the dualistic conflicts of the novel. Truth is located in neither one of the aspects. Rather, it is the product of connection, of a sustained interrelation between the two aspects, Wilcoxes and Schlegels, public and private, concrete and abstract. Forster's double vision enacts the novel's fundamental message, 'only connect'. Whilst Conrad's allied opposites are irreconcilable, Forster's aesthetic and thematic handling of the two realms suggests that a more harmonious reconciliation can be wrought. For Conrad the discomfiture between realms in his literature is an expression of the fundamental tensions of his age, but for Forster, literature provides an opportunity to impose order on the chaotic, formless flux of existence. His simultaneous subscription to an abstract aesthetic as well as one conventionally realist realises relationships as crucial to his artistic as well as his philosophic vision.

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[17] Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of E. M. Forster', in *The Death of the Moth* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 104 – 112 (p. 109).

I discuss Forster's use of negativity in *A Passage to India* as an abstract method of communication. The caves and the echo might be negative in their formulation, but they are forceful in their effect. His use of negation is an attempt to push language beyond the limitations of the sayable. Negativity, in *Passage*, 'allows the unsayable to speak'.[18]

In my final chapter, I argue that Virginia Woolf's use of familiar objects to translate intangible thought into concrete reality is a form of abstraction. The instances where her abstraction is most apparent are those where she fuses the metaphysical with the manifest, the intangible with the concrete. As with Conrad and Forster, then, Woolf's mode of abstraction is inherently dualistic.

Woolf's 'double vision', however, deviates from the former two authors' more traditional dualistic concept. Unlike the other authors of my thesis, the metaphysical aspect of Woolf's dualism is not "out there"; it is not a means of expanding beyond conventional linguistic limitations. Woolf relocates the metaphysical from "beyond" to within, to consciousness and the site of the individual. Her dualism centres upon the transmutation of the artist's thought into art. This preoccupation with the conversion of thoughts to words, consciousness to art, realises the metaphysical/ concrete binary within a new, individualistic context. It is this dualistic frame (of internal and external, vision and design, aesthetics and metaphysics) which aligns certain of her texts – like *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* – more with a Post-Impressionist (and thence, abstract), than an Impressionist aesthetic.

I show how abstract images in *To the Lighthouse* become a crucial means of reconciling the antagonistic forces of Woolf's vision. Objects, in particular, become a source of abstraction realising in literature something of Woolf's so-called 'moments of being'. In this novel, objects are charged with metaphysical ideas, thus compounding something concrete with something intangible. As for Conrad, abstract shapes (like those geometric shapes of the abstract movement in visual art), are a significant means in this novel of containing and, to a certain extent, expressing, various metaphysical, philosophical concerns. In certain

[18] Budick and Iser, *Languages of the Unsayable*, p. xvi.

instances, most notably 'Time Passes', abstraction is used as a means of obliquely communicating some of the novel's major contextual issues, like the First World War.

In my reading of *The Waves*, I argue that abstraction is fully realised as a synthesising force of opposites or disparate elements. It proves to be the design by which Woolf is able to reconcile the concrete and the metaphysical aspects of her vision. It is fitting to end with this novel, as its abstraction most comprehensively achieves what each novelist of this study, in their own way, sought to do. The abstract helped to draw a sense of the invisible into the visible. It charged concrete articulation with a sense of "something more". Abstraction allowed each author to speak of two apparently irreconcilable things at once, realising their 'double vision'.

Chapter One:
The Crisis of Dualism

I

The popular understanding of reality as dualist – divided into the phenomenal realm and the metaphysical realm – was compromised by the intellectual developments of the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As various advances in science and philosophy undermined the systems and fundamentals that had hitherto defined existence, many sought to replace the crumbling binaries with new dyads. Some, naturally, tried to maintain a sense of the dualistic structures previously held true, and sought to reconcile the new discoveries with the old systems. Others, however, came to perceive reality in relativistic terms. The most radical exponents of this view declared that all systems and fundaments were fictions. Reality, for them, was individualistic and subjective. Whilst the half-century that followed the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859) is renowned for its extraordinary scientific, technological, artistic, and philosophical developments, this period is characterised by a great degree of uncertainty and upheaval.

These developments have significant implications for the general concept and definition of the abstract. In the traditional understanding of reality as divided into the phenomenal and metaphysical realm, the abstract was located in the metaphysical aspect. It was non-concrete, ideational, and in some ways heralded "truth", reality, the thing-in-itself. Given the various reconceptions and relocations of truth, and the pervasive doubt in the tenability of a metaphysical realm, the abstract came to be increasingly associated with the concrete, the tangible, and the world of appearances. This shift is registered in the etymological developments of the term, and the artistic handling of it – both conceptually and visually – in the early twentieth century. The following is an account of the breakdown of the old dualistic structures, and the consequent ideological and intellectual revisualisations of reality. Though various in concept, these

revisualisations had a significant impact upon the representation of "reality" in the arts. The abstract experimentations of artists were an attempt to communicate new concepts of truth and reality. Crucial to the concern here, is the claim that abstract art has a unique ability to speak of the hitherto ineffable realms.

II

In the dualistic model of reality, "truth" was unerringly situated in the metaphysical dimension, rather than the phenomenal. The experiences of the individual occur within the realm of flux and temporality, and are confined therefore to the world of appearances, the knowledge of phenomena. Truth, on the other hand, was held to be eternal, immutable, one. Of theoretical necessity, therefore, it had to belong to a realm outside of human experience.[1]

The location of truth and, by implication, the "real", in a realm beyond that of the visible world is a predominating characteristic of the Western traditions of philosophy and theology. The term 'metaphysics' might be used to loosely speak of this broad and diverse tradition. In *Appearance and Reality*, F. H. Bradley defined metaphysics as 'an attempt to know reality as against mere appearance, or the study of first principles or ultimate truths, or again the effort to comprehend the universe, not simply by piecemeal or by fragments, but somehow as a whole."[2] Similarly, G. E. Moore defined it as consisting 'in the attempt to obtain knowledge, by process of reasoning, of what exists but is not a part of Nature […]. They have held that their science consists in giving us such knowledge as can be supported by reasons, of that supersensible reality of which religion professes to give us a fuller knowledge, without any reasons."[3] Reality is pitted against appearance; ultimate truths exist outside of Nature.

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[1] Ian Watt writes that, from Plato – Augustine – Aquinas – Spinoza, each philosopher 'had assumed some form of the view that truth was eternal, changeless, and unified, and that therefore the particular experiences of the individual in the temporal world of change were illusory or merely contingent, and certainly gave no reliable access to reality or truth.' Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth-Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 288.

[2] F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, 1893 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn 1897, 9th impression 1930), p. 1.

[3] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 1903 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 112.

Bradley writes that in our relentless quest to comprehend the universe in a way that is free from contradiction, we have devised the notion of a realm separate to our own. Regarded in isolation, attempts to 'reduce the world's diverse contents to unity have ended in failure.' However, the certainty that the visible world must somewhere be one prevails, 'and since this unity is not to be discovered in phenomena, the reality threatens to migrate into another world than ours.' By our failure to find the one in the flux of the apparent we have, suggests Bradley, 'been driven near to the separation of appearance and reality' (p. 105):

> The universe, upon this view, [...] falls apart into two regions, we may call them two hemispheres. One of these is the world of experience and knowledge – in every sense without reality. The other is the kingdom of reality – without either knowledge or experience. Or we have on one side phenomena, in other words, things as they are to us, and ourselves so far as we are anything to ourselves; while on the other side there are Things as they are in themselves and as they do not appear; or if we please, we may call this side the Unknowable' (p. 110).

Bradley, however, refutes this schismatic view of experience and reality, and attempts to reinstate significance within the world of appearance. I explore his motives and method for doing so later in this chapter. At this point it is clear, though, that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, certain dissenting voices refuted the claim that truth and reality existed beyond the possibility of perception, experience, and expression.[4]

Alongside of the doubts of the philosophers ran the claims and discoveries of the scientists. Until 1858, scientific knowledge was confined to describing the familiar and the apparent features of the visible world. Generally speaking, it was able to describe how something functioned in a particular way, but fell short of

[4] That is not to say that this period was the first instance in the history of philosophy that the metaphysical realm was denied. For example, Idealism - the suggestion that reality is fundamentally mental, and not external and unknowable – can be traced back to the ancients of India and Greece, and was later revived by empiricists like George Berkley in the eighteenth century. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, there were various parallel developments within other intellectual forums (particularly in science) that led to a more pervasive mistrust of the dualistic vision of reality: of an existence determined by Absolutes situated in an other, eternal, immutable realm. Equipped with evidence from the recent discoveries of other intellectual disciplines, the philosophies that refuted this metaphysics gained significant weight and attention.

innovation. Newtonian physics equipped one to live in a Newtonian world; the limitations of science were a reflection of the moderate pace at which humanity was progressing. Richard Dawkins refers to this stage as the 'middle world': nothing goes fast or slow, nothing is big or small.[5] The publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, however, marks the beginning of a period of extraordinary scientific discovery.[6] Until the final quarter of the nineteenth century, scientists were content that they were in possession of the systems that governed the visible world, and that little else remained unknown. Sanford Schwartz writes that 'scientists believed that they would soon possess an exhaustive description of the physical universe.' Developing understanding further was simply a matter of building upon the 'secure principles of Newtonian mechanics.'[7] The scientific discoveries in the final quarter of the century demonstrated, however, that the systems that had hitherto been accepted as fact were no longer infallible. These scientific advances did not so much follow the tradition of classical science, but went beyond it in a direction often contrary to and contradictory of the cherished tenets of Newtonian science. Rather than bolster the understanding transcribed by classical science, the discoveries of the late nineteenth century exposed a lack of knowledge and created a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability. Documenting this dramatic revision of the state of scientific knowledge, Alfred North Whitehead wrote in 1925 that 'the eighteenth century opened with the quiet confidence that at last non-sense had been got rid of. To-day we are at the opposite pole of thought. Heaven knows what seeming nonsense may not to-morrow be demonstrated truth."[8]

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[5] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006).

[6] Not only did Darwin's discoveries generate the work, discoveries, and theories of multiple other scientists, but, as John Gribbin records in *Science: A History 1543 – 2001* (London: Penguin, 2003), the proliferation of scientific discovery in this period can also be said to stem from the fact that during the nineteenth century, science had shifted from being the hobby of gentlemen to a well populated profession: '[r]oughly speaking, the number of scientists doubled every fifteen years during the nineteenth century' (pp. 360 – 1).

[7] Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 12.

[8] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World: Lowell Lectures 1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 143.

The matrix of scientific discoveries is complex; their interrelation, contradiction, and contingency extends far beyond the remit and concern of this thesis. There are, however, some significant developments in this complicated narrative that are pertinent, particularly the advances in quantum physics and the theory of special relativity.

In 1887, Albert Michelson and Edward Morley collaborated in an experiment to measure the velocity of the earth relative to the ether using beams of light. Surprisingly, they found 'that there was no evidence that the Earth moves relative to the ether - , or, to put it another way, the measured speed of light is the same in the direction of the Earth's motion as it is at right angles to the direction of the Earth's motion. Indeed, it is the same in *all* directions [...] Always the answer was the same – no interference between the two beams.'[9] In 1905, Einstein successfully explained these remarkable results in mathematical and theoretical terms. This became the theory of special relativity. The implications of special relativity extend far beyond remote scientific theory. Gribbin explains:

> Einstein saw that there is no preferred frame of reference in the Universe – no "absolute space" against which motion can be measured. All motion is relative [...], and any observer who is not being accelerated is entitled to regard himself (or herself) as at rest and to measure all other motion relative to his or her frame of reference (p. 439).

The overarching implication of the special theory of relativity, therefore, is that there is no objective frame of reference. In modern physics, it makes no sense to say "objective", or anything like it. By extension, special relativity does not entertain or even permit the concept of external, objective constants. The locus of truth cannot, therefore, be said to be outside of the flux and subjectivity of existence. Truth is relative, subjective, and not at all objective.

That same year, Einstein also proved the existence of quanta in his discussion of the photoelectric effect. The following quotation, taken from his "light quantum paper", is heralded by some as the beginning of the quantum revolution:

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[9] Gribbin, p. 437.

> According to the assumption considered here, in the propagation of a light ray emitted from a point source, the energy is not distributed continuously over ever-increasing volumes of space, but consists of a finite number of energy quanta localised at points of space that move without dividing, and can be absorbed or generated only as complete units.[10]

The photoelectric effect proved that, in addition to being observed to behave in waves (as already proved by Thomas Young's 'double slit' experiment), light also behaved as a stream of particles (or 'quanta'). It is this type of *apparently* contradictory study which Whitehead called 'nonsense' demonstrated as 'truth'.

In 1911, Ernest Rutherford displaced the conviction that the model of the atom was like a "plum pudding" with the discovery that it had a nucleus, thus giving way to the "solar system" model of the atom. Though apparently the case, this discovery was similarly problematic. Given that the nucleus has a positive charge and the electrons have a negative charge, it was remarkable that the atom of Rutherford's model didn't collapse; that the cloud of electrons didn't fall through the empty space into the nucleus. Niels Bohr's 1913 quantum model of the atom solved this. It was this discovery that provided a platform for the ultimate paradoxical discovery: Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. In the meantime, Louis de Broglie had demonstrated that 'we have no hope of understanding what an electron "really is" in terms of our everyday, common-sense experience.'[11] We are limited to describing the behaviour of electrons, relative to circumstance, with mathematical equations. Far from the nineteenth century confidence that science had tantamount to explained the phenomenal world, quantum physics expressed a fundamental limitation to knowledge. In 1927, Heisenberg published a paper scientifically proving the fundamentality of ignorance. In this, he demonstrated that 'certain pairs of quantum properties, such as position and momentum, can never both be precisely defined at the same time; there is always a residue of uncertainty [...] in the value of at least one of these parameters' (p. 520). The

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[10] Einstein, 'On a Heuristic Point of View Concerning the Production and Transformation of Light', 1905, in *Einstein's Miraculous Year*, ed. by John Stachel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 177 – 198 (p. 178).
[11] Gribbin, p. 518.

more accurately one aspect of the pair is established, it is at the cost of accuracy for the other. Heisenberg wrote:

> We *cannot* know, as a matter of principle, the present in all its details.[12]

The implications of the discoveries made in quantum physics are wholly destabilising to the perception of the phenomena as determined by a constant, unified other. Quantum physics actively demonstrates that the universe is not deterministic: nothing is totally predictable, and nothing is certain.

The theories of special relativity and quantum physics are generally proclaimed to be the two most successful and accurate theories of all time, but even in the present they remain irreconcilable.[13] The emergence of these often surprising, often contrary discoveries over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must, therefore, have been deeply baffling for the collective consciousness.[14] The old systems that determined knowledge and understanding of the phenomenal world were not only proven fallible, they were replaced by theories that proved the universe to be fundamentally uncertain, subjective, and, to a great extent, unpredictable.

In *Journey Through Despair*, John Lester demonstrates that the progression and prosperity of the late Victorian era was counterweighed with despair and anxiety. Asserting the all-pervasive impact of Darwinian evolution, he writes that 'there was scarcely any mode of thinking, ethical, spiritual, or aesthetic, which did not have to reckon now with the fact and the metaphor of evolution.'[15]

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[12] Werner Heisenberg, cited in Gribbin, p. 520.

[13] String Theory has, for some, achieved some reconciliation between the two by positing a single theory to explain gravity, electromagnetism, and nuclear physics. Physicists have by no means, however, reached a consensus over whether this has unequivocally wrought reconciliation between special relativity and quantum physics.

[14] In *Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) John Polkinghorne writes that 'the years following Max Planck's pioneering proposal were a time of confusion and darkness for the physics community. Light was waves; light was particles. Tantalizingly successful models, such as the Bohr atom, held out the promise that a new physical theory was in the offing, but the imperfect imposition of these quantum patches on the battered ruins of classical physics showed that more insight was needed before a consistent picture emerged' (p. 15).

[15] John Lester, *Journey Through Despair, 1800 – 1914: Transformations in British Literary Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 38.

Whilst evolution inspired discourses of progression, people began to suspect that the converse was possible: that individuals and civilizations could devolve and degenerate.[16] The multicultural, multiracial muddling that extended from British Imperialism was interpreted by many as a threat to their own state of evolution and civilization.[17] Writing in 1880, Arthur Mitchell condensed these concerns into the following list of 'important questions':

> Is civilization a thing which is maintained by an effort, as well as acquired by an effort? Do civilizations become old and decrepit, and die out by a reversion to the savagery out of which they emerged? Are there any outgrowths of civilization which tend to destroy its vigour? [...] are the centres of civilization permanent, or are they for ever shifting?[18]

Entitled *The Past in the Present*, Mitchell's book harks back to fallen empires and civilisations in his discussion of those in the present. He makes the foreboding, and somewhat prophetic, observation that 'the British Empire stands now very much where the Roman Empire stood then, and occupies a like dangerous place of breadth and prominence' (p. 214). The glory of their own empire and civilization was recollective of the past glory of fallen others. Inherent in their most revered, most impressive systems was the knowledge of potential and perhaps inevitable fallibility.

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[16] John W. Griffin, in *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: 'Bewildered Traveller'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), confirms that 'many people concluded that degeneration must be a natural corollary to progress' (p. 8). Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (New York: Appleton, 1895) articulates this anxiety within a different context, that of art. He identifies the prevalence of degeneracy in 'the originators of the new aesthetic tendencies', the contemporary artists and artistic movements (p. 22). Nordau defines degeneration as follows: '[w]hen under any kind of noxious influences an organism becomes debilitated, its successors will not resemble the healthy, normal type of the species, with capacities for development, but will form a new sub-species, which, like all others, possesses the capacity of transmitting to its offspring...its peculiarities, these being morbid deviations from the normal form – gaps in development, malformations and infirmities' (p. 16).

[17] Griffin argues that 'contrary to the impression of the Victorian era as confident and melioristic, the exploration of other cultures such as Africa mirrored back to the Victorians disturbing images of recidivism that sometimes shook their faith in the very idea of progress' (p. 77).

[18] Arthur Mitchell, *The Past in the Present: What is Civilization?* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1880), p. 201.

Darwinian evolution was implicit in the secularization and thence destabilisation of other systems of social organization.[19] Anthropological and evolutionary studies revealed that ethical systems were not pre-determined or absolute, rather, they too had evolved and were inherently subjective: 'ethics were contingent and tentative rather than proven.'[20] There was a sense that the systems of belief that had hitherto defined and explained existence were man-made constructs; they were fictions, not facts. Doubts in the objective existence of ethical codes naturally undermined the other objective truths that were held to exist outside of the flux of the subjective world of appearances. Solace was sought, by various prominent intellectuals, in the authority of science and by extension, in the phenomenal rather than metaphysical. Karl Pearson articulated the scientific displacement of the metaphysical in 1892, stating that:

> The touchstone of science is the universal validity of its results for all normally constituted and duly instructed minds. Because the glitter of the great metaphysical systems becomes dross when tried by this touchstone, we are compelled to classify them as interesting works of the imagination, and not as solid contributions to human knowledge.[21]

Pearson sought to replace the axioms associated with metaphysical systems with axioms derived from scientific sanction. He asserted that the aim and method of modern science was 'the classification of facts and the formation of absolute judgments upon the basis of this classification'; his use of the word 'absolute' is calculated against the metaphysical. He still defines the absolute as 'independent of the idiosyncrasies of the individual mind', not unlike the metaphysical regard for the absolute as necessarily outside of, or beyond, individual conception (p. 11). However, his assertion that the absolute derives from scientifically established facts (and given his regard for the metaphysical as 'interesting works of the imagination') situates the absolute in the phenomenal realm, whilst the metaphysical is deemed a

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[19] Griffin asserts that 'the secularisation of ethics, influenced both by Darwinism and anthropology, deflated the argument for Christianity as the central civilizing force, and for morality as dependent upon divine sanctions' (p. 181).
[20] Griffin, p. 183.
[21] Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science*, 1892 (London: Dent, 1937, repr. 1949), p. 26.

construct of the individual mind. Pearson claimed that the only avenue via which knowledge of the universe is gained is through 'the gateway of scientific method'. The scientific method of classifying facts and utilising these as the basis for forming absolutes is, for Pearson, 'the only way to ascertain truth' (p. 20).

The matrix of intellectual developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is complex. The various observations and theories that originate from this period interconnect, contradict, and inter-depend. But these diverse intellectual endeavours can be said to share one manifest success, namely their collective proof of the strength of empirical inductive reasoning to discern truths about the universe. Pearson validates the new authority bestowed upon the scientific method remarking that 'the day has gone by when philosophical or theological dogmas of any kind can throw back for generations the progress of scientific investigation.' He bolsters this view in his criticism of the philosophical method, arguing that 'it seems based upon an analysis which does not start with the classification of facts, but reaches its judgments by some obscure process of internal cognition' (p. 21). Developing this he writes that:

> It is therefore dangerously liable to the influence of individual bias; it results, as experience shows us, in an endless number of competing and contradictory systems. It is because the so-called philosophical method does not, when different individuals approach the same range of facts, lead, like the scientific, to practical unanimity of judgment, that science, rather than philosophy, offers better training for modern citizenship (p. 22).

Pearson objects to the subjective basis of philosophical systems.[22] He regards science as providing a method of understating the world that happily guards against the flux and uncertainty of individual subjectivities. Essentially, Pearson displaced one system of absolutes with another. He favoured science as a system for getting at the truth, claiming that its empirical and logical method ground it in a basis of objective universal fact. The alternative (philosophical method) is subjective, fallible, and inconsistent, and cannot therefore be the gateway to

[22] Lester records this shift of perspective writing that the new view of human cosmos 'proposed that empirical observation and inductive logic were man's only sure routes toward this ultimate, inhuman truth, and it would admit no other cognitive faculties than these' (p. 25).

immutable, unifying truth. In *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution*, Pearson reasons that in his time, human moral conduct is 'no longer regarded as the axis of the universe', suggesting that significance in life is no longer determined by the judgements that are said to determine one's fate after life. Instead, in the interminable quest for unity in all creation, 'we turn to science rather than to religion to find the unity in the world drama.'[23]

There is a tacit recognition in Pearson's theory that without metaphysics or the objective axioms that accord the world a certain significance, only the subjective frame of reference remains.[24] Pearson expressed a degree of anxiety, shared by many of his peers, about the consequent onus placed upon the individual. He observed that social evolution in particular had promoted the supremacy of the individual, and he disputed the legitimacy of a society based upon individualism, writing that: 'the power of the individualistic formula to describe human growth has been overrated, and the evolutionary origin of the socialistic instinct has been too frequently overlooked.'[25] He contended that 'a nation needs not only a few prize individuals, it needs a finely regulated social system – of which the members as a whole respond to each external stress by organized reaction – if it is to survive in the struggle for existence' (p. 309). In the absence of a metaphysical realm and in the face of subjective uncertainty, Pearson responds to the apparent need for regulation, structure, and certainty. Thus he rescues the individual, cast adrift from the old system of metaphysical absolutes, with a scientifically based, phenomenally situated system of absolutes.

Pearson was not alone in his endeavour to restore truth to a realm separate from the subjectivities and uncertainties associated with phenomena. Faced with the loss of the metaphysical realm, as well as the axioms that normally and objectively circumscribed existence, many sought to contrive a new order. Fundamental to the method of many of these endeavours, was, as with Pearson,

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[23] Pearson, *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution*, 2 vols (London: Edward Arnold, 1897), II, p. 256.

[24] Describing the world without absolutes, Lester writes that 'the certainties had become uncertain; man was called to live not so much with a world of materialistic determinism, as with a world of chance and change within which man had now to grope his way in uncertainty' (p. 30).

[25] *Grammar*, p. 308.

the separation of the subjective, fallible individual from the objective reality and truth, maintaining, therefore, a dualistic conception of reality.

III

Without the metaphysical realm, truth was conceptually dislocated and in need of resituating. Although the metaphysical realm was compromised, the belief in a fundamental truth governing and determining existence was by no means dead. In 'The Will to Believe', William James spoke of a ubiquitous desire for truth. He wrote, 'we want to have a truth; we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives.'[26] Diverse individuals – philosophers, scientists, artists, theologians – attempted in diverse ways to refigure and relocate reality and truth. Whilst the theories that derive from these attempts are various and contrary, they are bound by one common tendency. Their quest to preserve the concept of a unifying, immutable, fundamental truth depended upon the segregation of that truth from the flux and uncertainty of the world of appearances. Thus these theories perpetuate the dualistic model of existence, composed of the objective and the subjective realms.

'The Will to Believe' was originally delivered as an address by James in 1896. In it, James defended the right 'to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced' (pp. 1 – 2). The paper responds to the growing scepticism of the period, and represents an attempt to embrace the advances made in the empirical and rational disciplines whilst maintaining the 'hope' that religion and the truth it conveys is still tenable. Having declared the common faith in truth, James identifies two ways in which people perceive this truth: the empiricist way and the absolutist way. 'The absolutists', wrote James, 'say that we not only can attain to

[26] William James, 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897, repr. 1917), pp. 1 - 31 (p. 9).

knowing truth, but we can *know when* we have attained to knowing it; while the empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when. To *know* is one thing, and to know for certain *that* we know is another' (author's emphasis, p. 12). James claims that we are instinctively absolutists, but argues that one ought to fight the urge toward absolutism. He aligns himself with the phenomenal realm, rather than metaphysical, declaring himself a 'complete empiricist' (p. 14). The only certain truth is that of the existence of consciousness. But though empiricists like James apparently 'give up the doctrine of objective certitude', they 'do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself.' Rather, James writes, 'we still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think' (p. 17). Whilst the sceptic preaches against religion on the grounds that "sufficient evidence" is yet to be found, James argues that it is not anti-rational, nor anti-intellectual to retain religious belief. 'Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear?' (p. 26). Whilst James then apparently sides with the contemporary preference for empiricism rather than absolutism, he maintains that hope (or faith) in the truth of religion is not incompatible with the understanding that truth is phenomenal, experiential, and subjective. It is the recognition of this subjectivity, of his own 'passional' needs and non-intellectual instincts, that leads him to the conclusion that one can 'will to believe' in the truth of religion.[27]

The desire to cling to a metaphysical truth as opposed to one found empirically inspired, in some, a mistrust in the purported veracity of science. Havelock Ellis argued that science ought be regarded as a making process, akin to the creation of art. Science, observed Ellis, is 'perpetually laying aside the "facts" which it thought it knew, and learning to replace them by other "facts" which it comes to know as more satisfactory in presenting an intelligible view of the world.' This process of redescription is not only 'legitimate' but 'inevitable' in the endeavour to "know" the phenomenal world. This process is 'active and creative',

[27] 'Evidently, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions' (p. 11).

and, as such, 'it is no longer possible to deny that science is of the nature of art.'[28] Given the extraordinary and contrary nature of much of the scientific discovery, the regard for scientific theory as artistry was not unreasonable. And for Ellis, this association didn't undermine the authority of scientific theory. Others, however, were deeply suspicious of the creative quality of scientific description. Lester outlines this particular objection toward the scientific approach:

> There grew a conviction that the scientific reason did more to hide reality than to reveal it, that in its preoccupation with the objective world it could throw no light on the subjective one [...] and that to make its method work, science had adopted its own necessary fictions, of force, matter, lines and space, and had deduced from them a world-view which it then asked men to accept as "real" (pp. 88 – 89).

The clamour of the scientific advances of the latter half of the nineteenth century drowned out the characteristically tacit understandings of the universe. The theories that spoke of an absence were displaced by the rational structuring of the physical world. The domain of science was greatly extended from a limited account of the visible, physical world, to the account of *all* visible and invisible phenomena.[29] Science claimed the ability to speak of what was previously understood as unspeakable, of what was not only hitherto unknown but, in some regards, unknowable. For some, however, the method of science was a process of overlaying the subjective world with objective suppositions. There was a sense that rather than unearthing truth, the desire to speak masked rather than revealed reality. John G. Peters records that the growing prominence of science 'caused some to fear a society based solely on facts, while others felt that applying scientific methodology to all phenomena simply oversimplified reality.'[30] In its sheer faith in

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[28] Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (London: Constable, 1923), p. 65.

[29] Arthur Balfour complains of this predominance and acceptance of science stating that 'without any preliminary analysis, nay, without any apparent suspicion that a preliminary analysis was necessary or desirable, they have chosen to assume that scientific beliefs stand not only upon a different, but a much more solid platform than any others; that scientific standards supply the sole test of truth, and scientific methods the sole instruments of discovery' in *The Foundations of Belief: Being Notes Introductory to the Study of Theology*, 1895 (London: Longman, Green, rev. edn 1901), p. 251.

[30] John G. Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 9.

its singular ability to apprehend the whole of reality, the scientific method was perceived by some as contriving structure and sense where there was none. For these sceptics, science ought not be the sole authority of human knowledge and comprehension. Reality was not wholly knowable. Systems that lay claim to knowledge of phenomena, therefore, had to admit something of the ineffability of existence.

From this came the attempt to reconcile the ineffable dimension of metaphysics with the scientific claims to knowledge. Some, like Reverend Hutton, sought to incorporate the existence of God into scientific discoveries.[31] In response to Drummond's evolutionary theories, Hutton complained that he failed to touch upon 'the crux', namely 'what of God is in Environment."[32] Hutton doesn't seek to prove the existence of God – 'it is an impressive fact that God lives' – rather, armed with this certitude, he attempts to locate God within the recently established axioms of science. Evolution, admits Hutton, 'cannot always be traced – God lives in the gaps of the untraced.' Though certain elements of existence can be known, God is pervasive in the unknown; 'God is not absent from where we are ignorant' (p. 40). Similarly, in *The Foundations of Belief*, Arthur Balfour finds both Naturalism and Idealism wanting in their isolated explanation of the incomprehensible aspects of the world. His solution, therefore, 'consists in simply setting up side by side with the creed of natural science another and supplementary set of beliefs, which may minister to needs and aspirations which science cannot meet, and may speak amid silences which science is powerless to break.' In this view, the natural world and the spiritual world – 'the world which is immediately subject to causation and the world which is immediately subject to God' – are both real, 'and each of them the object of real knowledge' (p. 198). Rather than a unified system of belief, Balfour describes his own system as a 'patchwork scheme of belief' (p. 199). The relationship between these two apparently contrary regions

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[31] Samuel Hynes, in *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), writes that 'Victorian science may have made metaphysics obsolete, but it had not destroyed men's metaphysical itch, and much of what one might generally call Edwardian science is concerned with the problem of restoring metaphysics to the human world' (p. 134).

[32] Reverend Hutton, *"The Ascent of Man": Its Note of Theology (Being the Opening Lecture of the United Presbyterian College, Edinburgh 16th October 1894)* (London: Alexander Gardner, n. d.), p. 35.

of knowledge is described as 'contiguous but not connected, like empires of different race and language, which own no common jurisdiction nor hold any intercourse with each other, except along a disputed and wavering frontier where no superior power exists to settle their quarrels or determine their respective limits' (p. 198). This uncomfortable binary stems from expediency, rather than fundament. 'The unification of all belief into an ordered whole', is, wrote Balfour, the universal ideal, and one which ought never be abandoned. Given the 'present condition of our knowledge', however, that unity remains unattainable. By itself, science is insufficient for explaining phenomena. Religion is a principle which science 'requires for its own completion':

> The ordered system of phenomena asks for a cause; our knowledge of that system is inexplicable unless we assume for it a rational Author. Under this head, at least, there should be "no conflict between science and religion"' (p. 289).

Maintaining a perception of reality in dualistic terms was, for Balfour, essential.

In 1882, the Society for Psychical Research was formed for, they stated, 'the purpose of inquiring into a mass of obscure phenomena which lie at present on the outskirts of our organised knowledge.'[33] Using methods and hypotheses that could acceptably be called "scientific", the society sought to prove and comprehend the existence of shadowy, ulterior realms of existence. They explored avenues that might now more commonly be associated with mysticism, the supernatural, and the psychical. They did so, however, with a certain measure of legitimacy, as not only did they appeal to a popular fascination, but numerous of their main proponents were undoubtedly of an intellectually respectable pedigree. The afore discussed Balfour was one such member. He stated in an essay on 'Psychical Research' in 1920 that:

> it does seem that outside the world of nature, as we, from the point of science, have been in the habit of conceiving it, there does lie a region in whose twilight some experimental knowledge may laboriously be gleaned;

[33] Taken from a statement made by the Society, cited in Hynes, p. 138.

> and even if we cannot entertain any confident hope of discovering what laws its dim and shadowy phenomena obey, at all events it will be some gain to have shown, not as a matter of ascertained fact, that there are things in heaven and earth not hitherto dreamed of in naturalistic philosophy.'[34]

Balfour – prime minister of Britain 1902 to 1905 – maintained that there is something 'outside the world of nature', a shadowy realm beyond the world of appearances. Though scientific and intellectual practice may not reveal this realm entirely to us, it casts sufficient light to reveal and confirm the existence of this mysterious, "other" reality. Given that physics was, as Michael Whitworth points out, 'increasingly dealing with the phenomena inaccessible to unaided human perceptions', the leap from the invisible of the subatomic world to that of the metaphysical did not seem unreasonable.[35] Still, for all their scientific posturing, the primary appeal of the society's psychic investigation was, as Hynes argues, 'essentially religious' (p. 139). Though presented as scientific, therefore, the driving force behind the society's purpose was to divine and maintain the existence of a metaphysical realm, ironically by utilising the very systems that threatened to undermine that realm.

Alfred North Whitehead was another exponent of the co-existence of science and religion.[36] *Science and the Modern World* is, ostensibly, a narrative of the significant scientific discoveries of the previous few decades. Tacked on to the last quarter of this text, however, is a defence of the metaphysical in relation to the new science. He states, 'it is the foundation of the metaphysical position which I am maintaining that the actuality requires a reference to ideality. The two realms are intrinsically inherent in the total metaphysical situation' (p. 196). Whitehead

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[34] Arthur Balfour, 'Psychical Research', in *Essays Speculative and Political* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1920), pp. 190-191.
[35] Michael H. Whitworth, *Einstein's Wake: Relativity, Metaphor, and Modernist Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 83.
[36] In *Angels of Modernism: Religion, Culture, Aesthetics 1910 – 1960* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Suzanne Hobson notes that certain aspects of scientific discovery required a language not dissimilar from that commonly used to speak of religious concerns. Literary critics, she observes, have pointed out 'that discoveries such as the "fourth dimension" and "hyperspace theories" were by no means incompatible with the "search for a metareality, for a mystic dimension' (p. 74).

speaks in terms of binary realms – 'we must look for the reality behind the scene' – and reasons that behind the empirical, rational world must be God:

> God is the ultimate limitation, and His existence is the ultimate irrationality. […] God is not concrete, but He is the ground for concrete actuality. No reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality (pp. 221 – 222).

Whitehead locates God beyond all appearances, beyond all the systems and theories of science and, in doing so, avoids any logical objection to the coexistence of the two realms. Like Balfour, he argues for the necessity of two realms for total explanation of existence. Science is concerned with explaining the physical, tangible properties of the visible world, whereas metaphysics deals with the abstract dimensions of existence: 'what one side sees, the other misses; and vice versa' (p. 229). By envisioning these realms the essential complement of one another, Whitehead divorces the realms absolutely and thus avoids altogether the problem of reconciliation.

Whilst these individuals devise solutions to the issue of reconciliation between the new science and metaphysics, they fail to establish any concrete defence of the existence of a metaphysical realm. Their defence of this realm seems bolstered by nothing more than a common desire for its existence. Like William James, Whitehead prefers the optimism that accompanies religious belief to the alternative sceptical pessimism. 'The fact of religious vision', he asserts, 'is our one ground for optimism. Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience' (p. 238). Without a concrete rational basis for the existence of the metaphysical, therefore, these theories are based not upon proof, only possibility. For others, however, the apparent incongruity of science and metaphysics did not call for a theory that reconciled the two. Rather, science derailed the possibility of metaphysics altogether. Religion and belief in the beyond became – aside from the psychological comfort it provided – inessential and untrue. The dualist vision of reality, however, persisted, finding form in other systems proposed during this period.

IV

The implosion of the metaphysical abandoned the individual to the phenomenal realm. Isolated from the axioms that had previously defined existence, many were inclined to seek for significance elsewhere. The desire for abstraction prevailed. One of the most prolific binaries to emerge from this desire was the segregation of the internal individual consciousness from the visible, external world.[37] Whilst science provided systems by which to comprehend the phenomenal world, these objective systems spoke little of individual subjectivity. This binary of objective and subjective corresponds to and incorporates various other conceptual divides: between society and the individual; the external systems of order and internal flux and formlessness; actual life and the imaginative life. For many of those who had rejected the metaphysical realm as a fiction, these binaries figured a means of realising the residual belief that truth and reality were somehow separate from the external, visible world.

In 1925, Whitehead observed that 'modern philosophy is tinged with subjectivism, as against the objective attitude of the ancients' (p. 173). Metaphysics had provided an objective, external, immutable frame against which the drama of subjective existence and experience was set. In its stead, science provided something of an objective frame which could be seen to be the ultimate determinate of phenomena.[38] Charging the empiricism and naturalism of science with fundamental truth was problematic. Science neither intended nor prescribed any purpose or ultimate significance to man's existence.[39] It did not, as Balfour argued, 'minister to needs and aspirations', and, by itself, 'leaves tracts and aspects

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[37] Lester records that 'since order had failed man in the external world, he had to fall back on the construction of an internal order in the world' (p. 185).

[38] Although, as was earlier observed, the uncertainty and contrary nature of the new science rendered it, though provable in many respects, volatile. The effect of this character of the new science will be discussed in the next section.

[39] Ian Watt writes, 'it was a heavy blow to be deprived of the old assumption that there is a humanly significant order and purpose throughout time and space, continuity or analogy between the laws governing stellar galaxies and those governing human existence. Once science had denied this analogy, it is understandable that Conrad and many of his contemporaries should have drawn negative moral and political lessons from the newly revealed vulnerability of man's situation in the temporal and spatial order' (p. 154).

of that consciousness unaccounted for and derelict' (p. 198 and p. 266). "Facts" proved insufficient, therefore, for speaking of the fullness of being. An unusual shift took place. "Fact" (that is to say, "truth") had hitherto been located by various dualistic traditions in the metaphysical realm, but, following the denial of metaphysics it was reconceived as belonging to the phenomenal. It became something knowable, discoverable, tangible. In an effort to maintain a separation between the subjective experience of the individual and the objective realm of fact, the "abstract" quality of the metaphysical realm was internalised, and came to be associated with the consciousness:

> An abstraction is an individual with a life of its own. It is a little world in itself.[40]

The abstract, metaphysical world of absolutes was no longer the case. Rather, the abstract shifts from its association with the objective, and instead comes to characterise the subjective realm, the realm of consciousness. This relocation of the abstract suggested that the individual could not be explained by objective "facts" alone. Crucially, this shift allowed the individual to be "something more" than just the sum of their materiality.

Walter Pater might be considered one of the prime movers in the segregation of consciousness from external reality. In his conclusion to *Renaissance*, he said that:

> What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own [...]. The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us.[41]

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[40] Blanshard, Frances Bradshaw, *Retreat From Likeness in the Theory of Painting*, 1945 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2nd edn 1949), p. 152.
[41] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 251.

Pater divorces the systems that structure and order society from the experience and subjectivities of the individual. Speaking about the primacy of experience, Pater argued that one ought to dismiss these orthodoxies and traditional axioms as inessential.[42] The abstract only gains legitimacy if viewed in a subjective context, if we 'identif[y]' it with 'ourselves.' By marginalising orthodoxy and aligning 'abstract theory' with the self, Pater shifts the locus of truth from the objective to the subjective, from a realm "out there" to a realm "in here". As Hillis Miller summarised: 'the ideal world still exists, but only as a form of consciousness, not as an objective fact. The drama has all been moved within the minds of the characters, and the world as it is in itself is by implication unattainable or of no significance.'[43]

The publication of a spate of "self-help" books attest to the increasing emphasis placed upon the individual. As early as 1859, when Samuel Smiles published his wildly popular *Self-Help*, the individual was being revalued as the architect of society, and not the by-product. Smiles wrote that 'daily experience shows that it is energetic individualism which produces the most powerful effects upon the life and action of others, and really constitutes the best practical education.'[44] Levenson observes that Smiles expresses 'the desire to dismiss external and traditional norms and to make the independent individual the ground of value' (p. 15). Decades on, Arnold Bennett continued to promote the individual over society. In *The Human Machine*, Bennett responds to the

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[42] In *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908 - 1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Michael Levenson writes of Pater that he 'recognised, and no doubt correctly, that to redefine traditional values as phases of the self was to weaken traditional sanctions. Like others, he was intent on restricting attention to the psychologically verifiable, but he had no illusions (or scruples) about rescuing morality, religion or the external world. Pater followed relentlessly the logic of immediacy, acknowledging the primacy of the subjective but denying its necessary connection with extra subjective concerns. The consequence was a bifurcation into a realm of fact and a realm of subjective consciousness' (pp. 17 – 18).

[43] Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 12. In *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), Barbara Charlesworth describes the ultimate significance Pater bestows upon consciousness, writing that the premise of his conclusion is 'that nothing outside the mind has any meaning save that given it by the mind. Everyone creates for himself a reality which is personal, incommunicable, and imprisoning. However, each individual has sensory experience as a means of escape to the world outside the mind. Such experience may be an illusory escape, but the question of its truth or falsehood simply does not apply, for the mind gives it reality' (p. xv).

[44] Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help*, 1859 (London: John Murray, 1958), p. 39.

pervasive belief that 'men are only interested in themselves.' The fact of the matter, he contends, is that men 'are interested in every mortal thing except themselves.'[45] He sought to remedy this. Considering that the body and brain (chiefly the brain) are the 'sole means of contact and compromise with the rest of the world', it is remarkable, he argued, how little attention we devote to that self. Although Bennett complicates the picture by segregating the brain and self, the text's central aim – to refine one's individuality – adheres to a strict binary of individual versus society, consciousness versus external world. Both Smiles and Bennett, then, distinguish between the governing systems of society and individual will. This division structures a binary between external and internal, objective and subjective. And though both authors acknowledge a responsibility of the individual toward society, the ultimate value is embedded in individualism.

There are innumerable other examples of the intellectual separation of subjectivity and objectivity, the individual and society. The development of psychoanalysis, for instance, corresponds to the new philosophical tendency to situate "truth" within the realm of consciousness (or, more accurately, within the subconscious). Naturally, psychoanalysis is a corollary to individualism.[46] The developments in semiotics, pioneered by Saussure, and cultivated by the likes of C. K. Ogden, also devalue fact in favour of subjectivity. Ogden professes to write in the light of the 'recent stirrings in psychology' which have 'mainly if not altogether been concerned with feeling and volition.'[47] This individualistic subjectivity influences his belief that semiotic meaning is relative, rather than fixed: 'neither

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[45] Arnold Bennett, *The Human Machine*, 1908 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 8th edn 1914), p. 6.

[46] Jung tracks the development of individualism writing that 'man as an individual is a suspicious phenomenon, the right whose existence from a natural biological standpoint could be seriously contested, because, from this point of view, the individual is only a race atom, and has a significance only as a mass constituent. The ethical standpoint, however, gives to the human being an individual tendency separating him from the mass, which, in the course of centuries, led to the development of personality, hand in hand with which developed the hero cult, and has led to the modern individualistic cult of personages.' In *Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study of the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido: A Contribution to the History of the Evolution of Thought*, 1916, trans. by Beatrice M. Hinkle, introd. by William McGuire (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 174.

[47] C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, 1923, ed. and introd. by W. Terrence Gordon (London: Routledge/ Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. 19.

denoting nor connoting can be used as if it were either a simple or a fundamental relation […] no word has any denotation apart from some reference which it symbolises' (p. 295).

Across various intellectual disciplines the objective metaphysical realm was replaced by a realm characterised by subjectivity. Though the notion of a metaphysical beyond was, for this coterie, false, the notion of a unifying truth remained. Prolific discoveries in the sciences expanded humanity's ability to describe phenomena in terms of fact; it was felt, however, that these factual systems were insufficient for grasping the essence of existence. Bare rationalism, empiricism, and naturalism, it would seem, inspired some with the sense of an absence, a sense of something incommunicable in factual, objective terms. Truth, in some ways, was maintained as both separate and utterly different from the world of appearances. By heralding individualism and subjectivity as superior to society and objectivity, the metaphysical is resituated from "out there" to "in here", from beyond to within. Truth and the real become, for these theorists, implicit in the subjective, not the objective, realm.

V

Whilst some maintained a dualist vision of the world by replacing the crumbled axioms and dissipated metaphysics with another realm, there were others who accepted the void. All that remained, in this view, was the world of appearances. Behind the phenomenal world there was nothing, no underlying determining absolutes, no fundamental systems underwriting conduct, no essential truth whatsoever.[48]

Nietzsche is the most renowned and the most prolific expounders of this view. First, though, it is worth considering the once hugely popular F. H. Bradley

[48] Lester records the apprehension associated with this outlook, writing that 'one thought that appalled the imagination of this time was that behind all phenomena perceptible to human senses there might lie – NOTHING. Perhaps all the world man knew was blank and void at the heart' (p. 31).

as a British proponent of monism.[49] In *Appearance and Reality*, Bradley writes against the common propensity to locate reality and truth in another unknown, unknowable realm. He argues that the binary structure of these various metaphysical systems 'does not teach that our knowledge of reality is imperfect; it asserts that it does not exist, and that we have no knowledge at all, however imperfect.' Metaphysics permanently drives asunder 'apprehension on the one side and the Thing on the other side.' In this logic, that which is considered 'real' can possess no quality of the world of appearances, or of the reality experienced (p. 111). On the basis that this renders the Thing 'without qualities' it is 'clearly not real.' It is 'mere Nothing', and, Bradley asserts, 'such an abstraction is palpably of no use to us' (p. 112). The fixation upon 'this wretched abstraction' averts man's gaze from his own, tangible concerns, marginalising the world of appearance and experience (p. 113). In supplanting metaphysics and the "unknowability" of truth, Bradley seeks to instate appearances and experience as the ultimate real, as the absolute. He writes, 'the Absolute *is* its appearances, it really is all and every one of them' (p. 431). Unlike the metaphysicians – who located the Absolute in a realm other to the world of appearance and experience – Bradley engenders appearance and experience with the Absolute.[50] In merging these commonly separate realms and concepts, Bradley replaces a dualism with a single vision. 'All appearance must belong to reality', because 'what appears is, and whatever is cannot fall outside of the real' (p. 123). This axiom leads Bradley to conclude that:

> Beyond all doubt then it is clear that Reality is one. […] And we have already found that all we know consists wholly of experience. Reality must be, therefore, one Experience, and to doubt this conclusion is impossible (p. 463).

Reality, experience, appearance are all bound up in one realm. There is no absolute reality outside of the bounds of knowledge; everything is apprehensible.

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[49] Though not well known today, Schwartz describes Bradley as once 'the most respected philosopher in Great Britain' (p. 31).

[50] Schwartz writes, 'Bradley maintains that the Absolute is not some higher reality beyond the world of experience. The Absolute […] is experience, the individual whole of immediate experience raised to a level that includes but transcends the fragmentary formulations of the intellect' (pp. 33 – 34).

Without an abstract or metaphysical realm, all that remains is the chaos and flux of the visible world. Whilst some reinstated dualism in a different situation – consciousness, for instance – others, like Nietzsche, surrendered existence entirely to formless flux. With the rise of individualism, the relationship between the individual and society, subjective experience and incontrovertible fact was central to the intellectual focus. Nietzsche, however, proclaimed "fact" to be a fiction.[51] The consequence is described by one contemporary – Remy de Gourmont – thus:

> We have learnt from Nietzsche to pull down the old metaphysical structures built upon a basis of abstraction. All the ancient cornerstones are crumbed to dust, and the whole house has become a ruin. What is liberty? A mere word. No more morality, then, save aesthetic or social morality: no absolute system of morals but as many separate systems as there are individual intellects.[52]

Nihilism devastated structures, exposing the individual. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche locates the origin of metaphysics in man's desire to furnish 'becoming' with a 'grand unity.' But this is invention, and, 'as soon as man finds out how that world is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, that last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world.' All that remains following this realisation, is the 'reality of becoming.' This, then, is the only reality, destitute of 'every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities.' Nietzsche describes the initial pessimism that this bleak realisation provokes, 'the feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realisation that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concepts of "aim", the concept of "unity", or the concept of "truth"' (p. 13). The individual is

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[51] In *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), Friedrich Nietzsche writes, 'against positivism, which halts at phenomena – "There are only *facts*" – I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself:" perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing' (p. 267).
[52] Remy de Gourmont, quoted in Griffin, p. 189.

cast adrift from the familiar but false systems of signification, into the non-deterministic, sensory flux.[53]

For Nietzsche, there is 'no truth', 'no absolute nature of things nor a "thing-in-itself"' (p. 14). He identifies the tendency toward and dependency upon dualism, and seeks to eradicate it. He described this dualism, or 'the antithesis', as 'the apparent world and the world invented by a lie.' 'The latter', he said, 'has hitherto been called the "real world", "truth", "God." This is what we have to abolish' (p. 254). Nietzsche dismantled this dualism with the declaration that the "real world" has simply always been the apparent world. This apparent world cannot be regarded in absolute or objective terms. It is the sum and product of multiple, individual viewpoints:

> The perspective therefore decides the character of the "appearance"! As if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective! By doing that one would deduct relativity! (p. 305)

Without truth, without absolutes, there is no objectivity. In Nietzsche's vision, therefore, there is only the world of appearances, and only the subjective perspective. Parallel to the emerging realisations in science, Nietzsche envisaged a relative existence, not one that was determined. This 'sweeping monism', as Alexander Nehamas describes it, denied all oppositional binaries and dualisms that had structured the moral and metaphysical systems. Nehamas writes that: 'Nietzsche wants to claim that truth and error, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil are not to be opposed to one another; on the contrary, he imagines them as points along a single continuum.'[54]

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, interrelation is the one fundament of existence, 'all things are linked, enlaced, enamoured [...] All anew, all eternal, all

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[53] Schwartz writes that Nietzsche 'refuses to identify the sensory flux with a psychic realm to which we must gain access; for him the flux is simply an indifferent mass of fleeting impressions' (p. 36). For Nietzsche, therefore, despite the individualism at the core of his philosophy, individual consciousness offers no realm of respite or reality outside of the chaos of the world of appearance and experience.

[54] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985),p. 44.

linked, enlaced, enamoured."[55] In the stead of objective fact and things-in-themselves, character is derived from interrelation, from the necessary interconnection between the various subjective components of the world. Nietzsche wrote, 'the world, apart from our condition of living in it, the world that we have not reduced to our being, our logic, our psychological prejudices, does not exist as a world "in-itself"; it is essentially a world of relationships; under certain conditions it has a differing aspect from every point; its being is essentially different from every point' (p. 306).[56] According to Nietzsche, reality is characterised only via the subjective perspective.[57] It is this kaleidoscopic perspective that makes (for Nietzsche) the notion of fundamental truth impossible. 'There are', he writes, 'many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes – and consequently there are many kinds of "truths", and consequently there is no truth' (p. 291).

Such extreme subjectivism places the ultimate authority upon the individual.[58] The total absence of external, immutable systems of fact means that the usual parameters that circumscribed meaning – morality, language, knowledge, and so on – cease to prescribe significance. Without these systems and structures, and without a fundamental truth, the truth that art sought to represent could only be conceived of and conveyed in relativist, rather than absolutist, terms. It was not, however, only Nietzsche's extreme nihilism that undermined conventional systems of representation. The intellectual theories that maintained a dualism despite their rejection of a metaphysical "beyond", also had a severe impact upon artistic representation. As the locus and concepts of truth shifted, so too did ideas about how one ought to convey a sense of that truth. One of the most telling manifestations of these fundamental shifts is in the appropriation of the abstract in

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[55] Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1885 – 5, trans. by A. Tille, rev. by M. M. Bozman, introd. by Roy Pascal (London: Dent, 1958), pp. 283-4.

[56] Nehamas writes of the relative nature of Nietzsche's monism observing Nietzsche's claim that all things in general 'are essentially interrelated and derive their character from their interrelations' (p. 44).

[57] This concept is somewhat realised in the scientific discovery that the character of light – particle or wave – depended upon how one looked at it. Nietzsche's claim for a relative rather than determined existence corresponds to the implications of many of the concurrent and proceeding scientific discoveries.

[58] In Nietzsche's philosophy, however, this was by no means an authority of equal distribution.

the visual arts. By plotting the various handlings and developments of both the form and concept of abstraction, the artistic innovations of the early twentieth century can be seen to provide a crucial parallel to the concurrent intellectual developments in philosophy, technology, mathematics, and science.

VI

The wealth of theoretical writing that accompanies the work of abstract artists attests to the implicit connection between abstract form in visual culture and changing visions and concepts of reality. Whether a direct response (as in some cases) to the disorientating intellectual developments of the period, or an apparently independent, but no less similar, innovation, the abstract art movement in all its various and contrary manifestations illustrates the aesthetic response toward the uncertainties and upheavals of the period. The development of the abstract aesthetic in visual art provides an invaluable paradigm for identifying and comprehending the abstract aesthetic in literature.

In 1919, Kazimir Malevich declared that imitative representation was non-essential in form and meaning:

> The new demands of purely painterly-plastic, subjectless, and objectless expression have become the goal. It is now clear that imitating a natural aesthetic harmony in a still-life has no meaning.[59]

The abstract art movement of the early twentieth century redefined conceptions of representation in painting. Artists were no longer obliged to draw their subjects from the external world, nor was skilful depiction of phenomena anymore the mark or aim of artistry. Painting became increasingly non-representative, alienated from nature and objectivity.

Until the twentieth century, imitation had been the definitive mode of representation in art. Tolstoy declared the artist to be 'a man who can draw and

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[59] K. S. Malevich, 'On New Systems in Art', *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, trans. by Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. by Troels Andersen, 2 vols (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), I, pp. 83 – 119 (p. 92).

paint everything'; 'everything', that is, that falls within the realm of perception.[60] Albrecht Dürer – a fifteenth-century artist whose mimetic representation was founded upon a subscription to mathematical principles – believed that 'the more accurately one approaches nature by way of imitation, the better and more artistic' one's work becomes.[61] The artistic culture of the nineteenth century was, for the most part, a paean to Nature and a commission in Realism.

John Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849 – 50) reinterprets a biblical scene in startlingly humanistic terms [*Figure 1*]. In this painting, Millais represents an apocryphal scene in the commonplace surroundings of the carpenter's workshop, deliberately imposing realism on a story usually elevated above and beyond mundane experience. The setting is parochial and simple, comprising of a rurally situated, perfunctory, unkempt workshop. Each figure is shown in the process of executing some regular function, some familiar activity. Christ is depicted as a small child exhibiting a wounded palm, receiving sympathy from his parents. The painting is temporally and topographically ambiguous; the generic background and clothing make it difficult to situate in any particular time or place. The passional symbolism of the painting – though implicit in the upturned bleeding palm of Christ, typological objects (for instance the planes of wood and nails), and pieta-like genuflection of Mary – primarily serves the overall humanistic and naturalistic representational ends of the painting. If George Eliot's assertion that 'realism is the faithful representation of common place things' is anything to go by, then the artistic culture of the nineteenth century was determined by that realism.[62]

Figure 1: *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-50) by John Millais[63]

[60] Leo Tolstoy, cited in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* by Wassily Kandinsky, 1st English edn 1914, trans. by Michael T. H. Sadler, introd. by Adrian Glew (London: Tate Publishers, 2006), p. 10.
[61] Albrecht Dürer, cited in *Retreat From Likeness* by Blanshard, p. 17.
[62] George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 180.
[63] ⟨ https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-christ-in-the-house-of-his-parents-the-carpenters-shop-n03584⟩

Whilst forms and theories of abstraction in visual culture are various and, sometimes, incongruous, abstract artists were united in their move away from what was variously called 'the copy theory', 'imitation', 'realism' and 'representation' in art. Comparing an art based on likeness to that of abstraction Kazimir Malevich said that:

> To reproduce beloved objects and little corners of nature is just like a thief being enraptured by his legs in irons [...]
> *Things have disappeared like smoke; to gain the new artistic culture*, art approaches creation as an end in itself and domination over the forms of nature (author's emphasis).[64]

Imitation is a manacle to creation. The ultimate purpose of art is creation, not replication. For an artist to truly "create", therefore, he must forfeit the representation of nature as the limitation of form. 'Painting can fulfil its special function only if the artist gives up representation.'[65] Cubist artists Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger expressed their frustration at the persistent popularity of imitative art using similarly incarcerative terms:

> But while the painter, eager to create, rejects the natural image directly he has made use of it, the crowd long remains the slave of the painted image, and persists in seeing the world only through the symbol adopted. This is why any new form seems monstrous, and why the most slavish imitations are admired.[66]

The art of the twentieth century placed new emphasis upon form. Artists sought a form that was *more* than a likeness to the 'actual life', they wanted one that would be 'the expression of the imaginative life.'[67] The illimitable qualities previously associated with the metaphysical realm were carried with the abstract to visual manifestation. Abstraction liberated form.

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[64] Kazimir Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting', in *Essays on Art*, I, pp. 83 - 119 (p. 19).
[65] Blanshard, *Retreat from Likeness*, p. 117.
[66] Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *Cubism* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1913), p. 23.
[67] Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics' (1909), in *Vision and Design*, 1920, ed. by J. B. Bullen (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 12 - 27 (p. 21).

Just as some thought of science as insufficient for speaking of the wholeness of being, many artists came to regard imitative practice in art as insufficient for representing reality as it was experienced. Imitative art was cast by many abstract painters and theorists as deceptive. Though a slave to representing the world of appearances, the superficial quality of "copying" lacked the capacity to express essential truth. Gleizes and Metzinger decried the critical tendency to describe imitation as the representation of things 'as they are.' According to these critics, 'the object possesses an absolute form, an essential form.' The two cubists responded, saying:

> What simplicity! An object has not one absolute form: it has many: it has as many as there are planes in the region of perception (p. 46).

Parallel to the refutation of absolutes in science and philosophy, then, certain artists revolted against 'absolute form' in visual representation. To represent reality in all truth, form had to reflect that reality was not immutable, fixed, and determined. 'Above all', continue Gleizes and Metzinger, 'let no one be decoyed by the appearance of objectivity with which many imprudent artists endow their pictures' (p. 25). Form, they argued, had to speak of the subjectivity that characterised reality and experience. It ought not to lay claim to objectivity or universality, but instead, should be mutable and free from dogmatic constraint. Unlike the 'fact' proposed by copyist technique, it was felt that an abstracted, liberated form could communicate something of the ineffability of reality and experience. In a sense, then, it was more real and more true than that which simply imitated the visible world.

With its flouting of conventional forms of communication, abstract art celebrated the rise of individualism and subjectivity. Relating the development of abstraction to the proliferation of individualism, Blanshard observed that 'to express the vision of the eye turned inward, something other than naturalism is needed, and a not inappropriate medium has proved the abstract form' (p. 113). Liberated from the constraints of copying, abstract form not only granted freedom of expression for the artist, it allowed the spectator a greater freedom of

interpretation. In the first edition of *Blast* (the magazine of the Vorticist movement), Wyndham Lewis promoted the new autonomy as a fundament of the Vorticist endeavour, writing that 'Blast presents an art of Individuals.'[68] 'Individuals' is not limited to those contributing artists, but is extended to the audience too. This is reflected in Lewis' claim that within every individual exists an 'Artist.' Piet Mondrian's prioritisation of consciousness similarly reflected this individualistic concern:

> The life of the truly modern man is neither purely materialistic nor purely emotional. It manifests itself rather as a more autonomous life of the human mind becoming conscious of itself.[69]

The move from likeness toward abstraction in art realised the newfound freedom from absolute truth and the individual's quest for self-determination.

Though the move away from mimetic representation gives abstract art some sense of coherence, it is by no means a homogenous movement, varying broadly in both manifestation and concept. The artistic response to the crisis of dualism is as diverse as that of other contemporary luminaries. Some sought to maintain the idea that truth and reality are situated in a sphere outside of the realm of common experience, whereas others veered more towards a monism, characterised by kaleidoscopic perspectives and conditioned by relative subjectivities. Central to all these divergent theories and styles is a fundamental preoccupation with 'truth.' It is the various interpretations of this concept that inspired and defined the development of the abstract form in art.

Abstraction is rooted in Impressionism.[70] William James asserted that the one certain truth is 'the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness

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[68] *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex*, ed. by Wyndham Lewis, 2 vols (London: John Lane, 1914), I, n.p. (inside cover).

[69] Piet Mondrian, 'Natural Reality and Abstract Reality' 1919, in *Theories of Modern Art: A Sourcebook by Artists and Critics*, ed. by Herschel B. Chipp (California: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 321-325 (p. 321).

[70] Jesse Matz, in *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), writes that 'the painters turned to impressions wanting sense, but found that they entailed a style of perception that only seemed to devote to immediate physical appearances. Impressions set them on the path to abstraction, as the history of art shows: once Monet and his contemporaries found that they could more realistically render "fleeting

exists.'[71] This belief could describe the essence of Impressionism, as a mode of representation that attempts to capture a moment of fleeting, sensorial, subjective experience. With consciousness at its centre, Impressionism registers the shift from objective to subjective, from universal fact to individual impression. As well as conceptually paving the way for abstraction, some Impressionist works began, on some level, to resemble abstractions. Close up, Seurat's style of pointillism is manifestly obscurative of the objects depicted; only at a distance does the composition become meaningful in a familiar way.

Cézanne is broadly hailed as the harbinger of abstraction, the pioneer of 'significant form.' Though he subscribed to familiar forms and the representation of objects, his composition and execution drew greater attention to the planes of the form, and its synchronicity with his use of colour. He was 'constructing an arrangement of colour and form complete in itself, a kind of abstract design.'[72] Cézanne's compositions structure new relationships between the various representative and significant elements of the painting. *Still Life with Apples* (1895 – 8) challenges the conventions of these semiotic relationships [*Figure 2*].

Figure 2: *Still Life with Apples* (1895-8) by Paul Cézanne.[73]

The proximity between the objects represented disrupts the dictum of mathematical perspective. Instead, Cézanne creates a sense of perspective governed by subjective impression. Though the objects presented in the foreground are larger and "nearer", and objects in the background are relatively smaller, and "further away", the conventions of perspective are troubled by a greater concentration on contriving a synthesis between the proximate shapes, planes, colours, and textures. Though ostensibly a still life comprising of fore-, mid-, and back- ground, the staging is ambiguous. Objects relate in terms of other objects,

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appearances" in relatively discontinuous brushstrokes, they began the developments that would lead to Seurat's points, Cezanne's shapes, and then to the abstract forms of Cubism and full-blown abstractionism' (p. 245).

[71] 'The Will to Believe', p. 15.

[72] Blanshard, p. 97.

[73] ⟨http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_idf78486⟩

not in terms of their position in the perspective of the composition. Kandinsky stated that:

> A picture is the synthetic unity of all its parts.[74]

The new synthesis between form and colour was the starting point in the development of abstract design.

The fragmentary nature of cubist art is reflective of its artists' conception of truth as kaleidoscopic and subjective. Gleizes and Metzinger wrote that:

> If so many eyes contemplate an object, there are so many images of that object; if so many minds comprehend it, there are so many essential images (p. 48).

This recalls Nietzsche's assertion that 'there are many kinds of eyes [...] – and consequently there are many kinds of "truths", and consequently there is no truth.'[75] Like Nietzsche, these Cubists visualise reality as relative to the individual, not absolute. 'We seek the essential', they state, 'but we seek it in our personality and not in a sort of eternity, laboriously divided by mathematicians and philosophers' (p. 47). The essential, therefore, is rooted "in here" not "out there", within the 'personality' and consciousness of the individual. 'There is only one truth', these Cubists assert, 'and that is our own' (p. 64). The less familiar and more ambiguous a representation is, the greater the ideative prospect for the individual. This abstraction enhances the image as something more than the purely imitative, rendering the 'thousand tints which evade the prism', 'that hasten to range themselves in the lucid region forbidden to those who are blinded by the immediate' (p. 40). The cubist vision celebrates individualism and the power of abstraction to expand beyond the limitations of familiar form, communicating "something more".

For later abstract artists however, the Cubists didn't move far enough away from the familiar form or close enough to total abstraction. Mondrian stated that,

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[74] Cited in Blanshard, p. 133.
[75] *The Will to Power*, p. 291.

'Cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality.'[76] There is a sense, from Mondrian's perspective, that the cubists clung too dearly to representing the world of appearances at the cost of access to the truth beyond appearances. Charles Harrison draws a distinction between the work of the likes of the cubists and that of Mondrian, by designating the former a 'weak' abstraction and the latter, 'strong.'[77] In a 'weak' work of abstraction, the object(s) represented are distorted, but retain a mimetic familiarity. In a 'strong' abstraction, the work represents nothing from the familiar world of natural and material existence. Given the theoretical differences of these artists, perhaps another and more probing way of distinguishing the spectrum of abstract art ought to be governed by a consideration of the artists' various concepts of truth, their visions of reality. Instead of 'weak' and 'strong', situating an artist in relation to monism and dualism, subjectivity and objectivity, the relative and the absolute, gives a more accurate understanding of their use of abstraction.

The cubist composition conveyed simultaneous multiple perspectives, each viewpoint relative to but separate from the next, the whole composed of disparate and contingent parts. This type of composition is reconcilable with the Nietzschean view of existence as relative, ungoverned by an immutable, objective truth. Parallels might also be drawn with the scientific revelation of perspective as a governing force of reality. Not only was the character of light found to be that of wave and particle, depending upon the experiment conducted, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle revealed that perspective itself was the thing that conditioned reality.[78] There were however, as Mondrian evidences, those who felt that the cubist situation of reality in the world of appearances was ill founded, and that truth and reality were, as the metaphysicians would have it, located in a separate realm. The maintenance of a dualistic and metaphysically tinged view of

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[76] Cited in Blanshard, p. 140.
[77] Harrison, Charles, 'Abstraction', in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, Gill Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Open University, 1994), pp. 184 - 262 (p. 185).
[78] This is characterised by the famous thought experiment "Schrödinger's Cat" in which an unseen cat in a box is simultaneously both dead and alive until the moment at which the box is opened.

the universe directed these artists toward what Harrison would call 'strong' abstraction. For these artists, abstract form – totally free from association with objects of the visible world - provided a means of accessing something beyond the usual realm of perception. The less a painting related to a limiting, recognisable sign, the more it could be said to relate to a truth behind appearances.[79] Abstraction provided a design, according to some, for accessing the spiritual. Wassily Kandinsky was one of the main exponents of this aesthetic spiritualism.

Kandinsky believed that a work of art ought to communicate 'inner necessity', the 'spiritual'. The form, or 'material substance', should be determined by the content, or 'spirit' of the painting. The scientific advances of the period had a profound impact upon Kandinsky's thinking, particularly Rutherford and Soddy's discovery in 1904 that, contrary to the dictates of its name, the atom was not irreducible and indestructible. The faith that Kandinsky had previously and unwaveringly put in the authority and truth of science shattered. As a consequence he 'rejected science and, with it, materialism, and art representing material objects. He turned to the realm of the spirit for his personal security, and the painting that seemed least earth-bound – abstraction.'[80] Abstract form was not essential to Kandinsky's vision, rather, form ought to derive from and be true to the inner resonance of the painting. In an essay discussing the 'Problem of Form' Kandinsky asserted that:

> Realism = Abstraction.
> Abstraction = Realism.
> *The greatest external difference turns into the greatest internal equality* (author's emphasis)[81]

Form, therefore (whether mimetic or abstract) ought to convey a spiritual essence that is the most profound expression of reality. Kandinsky, however, both stylistically and theoretically favoured the abstract form, stating that if a line is

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[79] Harrison argues that, for many advocates and practitioners of abstract art, the abstract enabled a kind of "seeing through"; with the notion that 'the artist is one who penetrates the veil of material existence in order to reveal an essential and underlying spiritual reality' (p. 198).
[80] Blanshard, p. 106.
[81] 'On the Problem of Form,' 1912, in *Theories of Modern Art*, pp. 155 – 170 (p. 162).

'freed from the aim of designating a thing and functions as a thing in itself, its inner resonance is not weakened by any subordinate roles and acquires its full inner strength' (p. 164). The driving force behind Kandinsky's vision, then, is the urge to get beyond material existence and to construct art as the site of a new psychic-spirituality.

Whilst Kandinsky's concept of the spiritual in art depends upon the notion of truth as a "reality behind appearances", it is also subjective, anti-formalist, and non-absolute. Thus in character, at least, it marks a departure from the determinism of old structures of significance, both philosophical and aesthetic. Like the Cubists, Kandinsky emphasised individualism as fundamental to his vision. In many ways, the theory that underpins his abstraction is akin to certain reconceptions of dualism, where the metaphysical dimension is maintained, but relocated to consciousness, and the true essence and 'spirit' of reality was to be found in 'inward drama of the Soul."[82] Kandinsky wrote that 'in each manifestation', that is to say, the form, 'is the seed of a striving towards the abstract, the non-material. Consciously or unconsciously, they are obeying Socrates' command – Know Thyself.'[83] Each manifestation, then, is imbued with a sense of the metaphysical ('the non-material'). In this move away from fixed forms and conventional systems of communication, Kandinsky presents art as something that ought to only be experienced sensorially, subjectively, rather than apprehended and known intellectually. The inarticulate experience that was generated from viewing a non-representative work allowed the individual to transcend the earthly and the familiar to the ineffable and metaphysical. For Kandinsky, the abstract provided a means of accessing the inarticulate beyond, figuring art as a situation for spiritual communion.

Other abstract artists, however, fixed their concept of abstraction to intellectually apprehensible, objective frames of knowledge. Unlike Kandinsky, Mondrian embraced the "truths" that scientific discovery were uncovering. He wrote:

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[82] Alfred North Whitehead wrote that '[t]he ancient world takes its stand upon the drama of the Universe, the modern world upon the inward drama of the Soul' (p. 174).
[83] *Concerning the Spiritual*, p. 40.

> Both sciences and art are discovering and making us aware of the fact that *time is a process of intensification*, an evolution from the individual towards the universal, of the subjective towards the objective; towards the essence of things and of ourselves.[84]

Not only is the concept of truth de-divinised for Mondrian, but so too is the individual. True reality – 'the essence of things and ourselves' – is universal, objective, and absolute. In their gradual discovery of an underlying network of fact, the intellectual pioneers of his period were, for Mondrian, rendering the subjective viewpoint of the individual inessential. Of the individual's right to interpret, Mondrian asserted that it is 'not permissible to say "this is how I see it"' (p. 355). Art ought to reflect the absolute, determined quality of existence: 'true art like true life takes a *single road*' (author's emphasis, p. 355).

Mondrian's style of painting propounds his theory of a truth based upon absolutes. Speaking of the condition of his time, he acknowledged that the general attitude was one of ennui towards the 'dogmas of the past, of truths one accepted but successfully jettisoned.' As a consequence of the growing acceptance of the relativity of everything, one 'tends to reject the idea of fixed laws, of a single truth'. Though he finds this reaction to modernity understandable, Mondrian asserts that its foundation is fallacious. Behind the world of appearances is 'a truth for all time', a system of 'laws' determining existence (p. 353). A "true" representation was, for Mondrian, therefore impossible to achieve through verisimilitude: 'one is well aware of the fact that in art one cannot hope to represent in the image things as they are, nor even as they manifest themselves in all their living brilliance' (p. 359). 'Nonfiguration' (as he called it) was the only means of representing 'true reality' (p. 358).

Whilst form, for Kandinsky, enjoyed a certain fluidity and lack of pre-determination, for Mondrian, it depended upon fixed principles:

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[84] Mondrian, 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art' ('Figurative Art and Nonfigurative Art'), 1937, in *Theories of Modern Art*, pp. 349 – 362 (p. 351) (author's emphasis).

> Nonfigurative art is created by establishing *a dynamic rhythm of determinate mutual relations* which *excludes the formation of any particular form* (author's emphasis, p. 356).

This nonfiguration is realised in his painting as geometric and reductive, using only rectangles and squares for his design, and a fixed colour palette consisting of the primary colours, and white, black, and grey. His *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black* (1921) is representative of this particular style [*Figure 3*].

Figure 3: *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black* (1921) by Piet Mondrian.[85]

The selection of colours and form are contrived to evade natural association and likeness. The geometrical exactitude of the intersecting planes effects a controlled unity: of shapes, colours, form and content. Art, says Mondrian, 'has revealed that forms exist only for the creation of relationships; that forms create relations and that relations create forms' (p. 350). *Composition* demonstrates Mondrian's attempt to achieve total abstraction of form and colour, and consequently, to realise 'aesthetic purification'.[86] The purpose of the 'determinate mutual relations' in his compositions is never representation, figuration, or any type of "meaning" directly associated with the forms, colours, and their relationships. The relationships between the elements are purely self-referential. According to Mondrian, pure abstraction shows that art 'is *not the expression of the appearances of reality such as we see it, nor of the life which we live*.' It is '*the expression of true reality and true life....indefinable but realisable in plastics*."[87] Pure abstraction realises – in art – the objective, absolute quality of the truth that underlies the world of appearances. In Mondrian's conception, therefore, the abstract is "more real" than the visible world it seeks not to represent.

Schwartz wrote that 'each philosopher's view of art varies with his approach to abstraction and experience: art may be associated with the recovery of immediate experience, the invention of new abstractions, or with the interaction between the

[85] ⟨https://www.turnercontemporary.org/exhibitions/mondrian-and-colour⟩
[86] Mondrian, 'Natural Reality', p. 321.
[87] 'Plastic Art', p. 359 (author's emphasis).

two' (p. 48). The same can be said of the visual artists' reactions to the shifting perceptions of truth. Some maintained, like Mondrian, a traditional dualist concept, composed of the fallible world of appearances and the fundamental world of absolutes. In this vision, the abstract offers an escape from the flux and chaos of everyday experience, to an objective, deterministic realm. Others, like Kandinsky, resituated the metaphysical, abstract dimension of that traditional dualism from "out there" (beyond perception) to "in here" (within consciousness). In this (still dualist) vision, the abstract celebrates subjectivity and individualism as essential, rather than fallible. The Cubists, however, subscribe to a monistic vision rather than a dualism. By drawing it in relation to the familiar, their abstraction is always seen in the context of the world of appearances. In this familiar frame, the abstract functions to expand the field of perception, realising in art the belief that reality is the sum of individual subjective perspectives.

Abstract form in the visual arts is complexly and inextricably bound to shifting concepts of truth and reality. The various forays into abstraction in visual culture represent a response to and reformulation of the relationship between representation and "reality". Some claim the abstract is objective, some subjective. Some see it as an escape from the world of appearances, others, as a means of immersing one in the apparent world. There are those that situate it within a dualistic frame, and others, in a monistic continuum. Some artists claim that it effects something of spiritual, ineffable experience, whilst others think it speaks of the realm of fact, of absolutes. The contrary and conflicting claims that artists made for the abstract demonstrate that, during the early twentieth century at least, this term is best thought of as plural and rich, rather than reduced to any singular definition. An appreciation of abstraction in visual culture is, therefore, wholly contingent upon appreciating the concept and manifestation of the abstract as fluid, amorphous, and continually shifting according to the particular vision of the artist. And it isn't just visual culture that has an impact upon the concept and definition of the abstract. In the final section of this chapter, I survey the usage of the term in various Modernist magazines, demonstrating that, across culture, the term 'abstract' registers certain significant conceptual shifts. If we apply this

understanding of the abstract (as rich, multifarious, shifting) to our reading of early twentieth-century fiction, then we can begin to appreciate the hitherto disregarded abstract quality of some of this writing.

VII

Whilst the intellectual developments of this period cannot, in any way, be regarded as unanimous in their reconceptions of "truth" and "reality", there is one overarching observation to be made. Various concepts, fundamental to describing reality, shift and merge into the realms of their conceptual opposites. These shifts tend not to be universally applicable – Bradley's mergence of truth and the world of appearances, for example, was by no means ubiquitously accepted – however, the proliferation of shifts are indicative of the uncertainty and upheaval that characterise the period. Certain shifts were more perceptible and more generally accepted than others. The emergent preference for the subjective over the objective, for instance, bestows the significance conventionally ascribed to the determined, the absolute, upon the relative, the individual. In this shift of emphasis, the subjective acquires qualities usually attributed to its oppositional other. It becomes the supposed locus of true experience and is thus held to be the sole access point to actual reality. Conversely, in this shift, the objective is undermined. Fact becomes insufficient for speaking of the true essence of reality; like subjectivity before it, it becomes limited and reductive, no longer universal.

The concept of the abstract undergoes various shifts of association and significance as a consequence of the myriad reconceptions of truth and reality in this period. Plotting the etymological development of the term "abstract" across culture provides a telling narrative of the increasingly contrary definition of its character. Depending upon where and how one looked at it, it could be thought of as virtually any combination of metaphysical, universal, concrete, or relative.

In the conventions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century usage, the pitting of "abstract" against "concrete" encouraged the association of the abstract with the universal, metaphysical, inexpressible realm. M. M. Cosmoi (the

pseudonym of Dmitri Mitranovic, a writer for *The New Age*) regularly associated a definition of the abstract with the features significant of the ineffable realm: '[a]ll finiteness and all earthliness attains the same divine state by becoming infinite, universal, abstract.'[88] The tendency to disassociate the abstract from the vital, visible world and to recreate it in terms of disenfranchised concept and metaphysical "truth", aligned it with the perception of the ineffable realm as the locus of divinity or absolute truth.[89]

The term "abstract" had hitherto been used to denote 'an idea, quality, or state rather than a concrete object'.[90] The use of "abstract" to denote a particular aesthetic was not yet established at the turn of the century.[91] The journals and magazines of the period provide a useful register for the etymological development and common usages of the term. In *The New Age*, the deployment of the term to speak of principles, concepts, and universals is constant between 1907 and 1922. Contributors wrote of 'abstract ideas', 'abstract principles like Truth, Justice and Liberty', 'abstract modes of thinking', 'abstract theory', 'abstract truth', 'abstract deities', and so on. *Scribners* likewise maintained a focus on the term as immaterial and intellectual, separate from concrete, everyday existence. *The Egoist* (1914 – 1919), featuring many of the significant contributors to the Modernist movement, mainly deployed the term in the aesthetic context, demonstrating a shift in common usage. Of all the Modernist magazines, *Blast* most consciously situated the term in the aesthetic context, featuring "abstract" thirty-seven times in the first publication, and twenty-six in the second.

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[88] M. M. Cosmoi, 'World Affairs', 26th May 1921, *The New Age*, 4, 29 (London: The New Age Press, 1921) ⟨http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1140814887289219.pdf⟩ [accessed 30 March 2011], p. 40.
[89] The phrase 'abstract truth' appears on various occasions in *The New Age*.
[90] OED, Third edition, October 2011; online version December 2011. ⟨http://oed.com/view/Entry/758⟩ [accessed 15 December 2011].
[91] The OED records the first usage of "abstract" to refer to a non-representative aesthetic mode as occurring in 1851, in Catal. Private Coll. *Paintings and Orig. Drawings* (Düsseldorf Gallery, N.Y.). The citation is as follows: 'Abstract painting, which admits of no faithful imitation of nature, but whose forms and colours, though they have their basis in nature, are yet reduced or invented traditionally or conventionally, or by individual caprice or fancy.' This clearly defines "abstract" as a non-representative aesthetic, however, this etymological development does not seep into common discourse until the pictorial abstract practices of artists, such as Picasso and Braque, infiltrate and redefine aesthetic culture.

Though used in this literature prior to the 1910s, "abstract" is only deployed as an adversary to the concrete, and, as such, had not yet acquired the Modernist aesthetic associations.[92] The aesthetic appropriation of the term to designate an art which is not founded on an attempt to represent external reality occurred in direct relation to the emergence of the abstract art movement during the 1910's. By 1914, this etymological development was firmly established in the discourse of Modernist magazines; prior to this year, however, usage is minimal and tentative.[93]

As it is drawn into the discourse of modern art, then, "abstract" does not lose its association with truth or the real, but it does, for some, come to be situated in the perceivable rather than the metaphysical realm. We have seen that the abstract – in its various manifestations and conceptions – speaks of the artist's notion of truth and reality. As art (quite literally) draws it in the tangible space of the visible world, however, it is rent from its previous location within the non-concrete, metaphysical realm. Not only that, but for many, the liberated quality of abstract form maintained an association with the illimitable quality of the metaphysical realm, thus transferring something of the character of the metaphysical to the physical. There is a sense, therefore, that irrespective of an artist's particular vision – absolutist, spiritual, monistic, and so on – within this Modernist context, the mergence and exchange of conventionally opposed binaries is inevitable in the attempt to achieve a "true" representation.

The reconceptions of truth and reality during this period are not noteworthy for their radicalism or novelty. There are philosophies throughout the course of intellectual history that have thought of truth as located in the world of

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[92] In a review of Yeats, F. S. Flint wrote, 'There are two kinds of symbolism, which may be called the concrete and the abstract. There is the symbolism which seeks to convey the inexpressible in a definite image, and there is the symbolism which is an intense imaginative impulse, identifying an emotion with an aspect of Nature.' 'Book of the Week', 29th August 1908, in *The New Age*, 18, 3 (1908) (London: The New Age Press) ⟨ http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1140813781935 69.pdf⟩ [accessed 30 March 2011].

[93] In an article called 'After Gauguin', printed 1912, Michael T. H. Sadler writes that 'even more abstracted is the work of Wassily Kandinsky.' Though this is a clear instance of the 'abstract' being deployed in a Modernist aesthetic sense, the usage in this instance is more of a subjective, adjectival quality, than it is a prescriptive, definitive statement. Interestingly, though this is a lengthy article on the emerging pictorial abstract movement, this is the only instance of the term abstract in the article. Taken from, *Rhythm: Art Music Literature Quarterly*, 4, 1 (1912) ed. by John Middleton Murray (London: The Saint Catherine Press, 1912) ⟨http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1159898450891023.pdf⟩ [accessed 31 March 2011].

appearances, subjectivity and individualism as the only reality, and metaphysics, a fiction.[94] The curiosity of this period lies in the almost ubiquitously felt need to reconceive of truth and reality. The cacophony of voices that responded to this need reveals that one of the main characteristics of this phenomenon was a lack of consensus. The proliferation and variety of attempts to assert "what and where truth is" evidences a period of transition and confusion. Many of these reconfigurations of truth complicate the conventional character of the concepts fundamental to describing existence. Subjectivity and individualism acquire most of the significance previously ascribed to objectivity and fact; the world of appearances becomes the locus for truth and reality; ineffability becomes associated with the limitations of experience, rather than denoting the metaphysical beyond, and so on. Taken as a whole, confusion, then, dominates the intellectual refiguring of truth and reality in the early twentieth century.

An examination of the handling of the abstract in the arts, however, provides one with greater clarity. Whilst there is no single shift or conception that can be said to be the consensus, abstract representation provides one with a single vista through which these various shifts and conceptions can be regarded, both in isolation and relation to one another.[95] The changes in representation are not only apparent in visual art; abstraction proliferates in early twentieth-century fiction. One of the earliest innovators of literary abstract representation – Joseph Conrad – contrived this form out of the mergence and confusion of conventionally separate spheres. The images and concepts he engaged with are characterised by his

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[94] Michael Whitworth, in *Einstein's Wake*, reminds us that the proliferating ideas of the early twentieth-century were not unique to that period: '[d]oes the external world exist in its own right, or is it merely something constructed by perceiving subjects? This is an old philosophical problem, but the scientific developments of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries renewed its importance for science, philosophy, and literature' (p. 83).

[95] In *Angels of Modernism*, Suzanne Hobson examines the Modernist appropriation of angels in literature. She argues that an examination of the angel allows for a more accurate and complex reading of Modernism's "religion" than the general assumption of the age's disenchanted secularism allows (p. 5). In the same way, a reading of the abstract allows for a more complex appreciation of the various ways in which artists and authors responded to shifting concepts of reality. Hobson observes that 'Modernist writers certainly do not avoid the angel no matter how compromised they suspect this figure to be. Instead, they layer new meanings on top of the old ones, appropriating the angel's charged legacy for a surprisingly diverse range of ends' (p. 10). We might think of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf's dualism and abstraction in the same way. Despite the compromise of these concepts, their 'charged legacy' allows for 'a surprisingly diverse range of ends'.

conflation of binary opposites – light and dark, community and individual, and so on – creating an abstract form via this subversion of normative representation. Abstraction in fiction, therefore, can be profitably examined both in terms of its aesthetic effect, and in relation to the intellectual reconceptualisations of truth, reality, and experience.

Chapter Two:
Joseph Conrad

I

Joseph Conrad's mode of description is unusually obscure. Despite qualifying as one of the elect authors of F. R. Leavis' *Great Tradition*, Leavis identifies the obscurities of Conrad's writing as a failing of his literature. The 'inscrutable', 'inconceivable', and 'unspeakable' are 'overworked' by Conrad, and 'yet still they recur'. For Leavis, Conrad's 'insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery' detracts from his descriptive power. 'The actual effect', he writes, 'is not to magnify but rather to muffle'.[1] Following this damning logic, the obscure episodes and aspects of Conrad's writing are a communicative failure. As the abstract movement in art has demonstrated, however, an obscure depiction, though potentially non-representative, is not without significant effect. It is within this abstract frame that Conrad's obscurity ought to be resituated and reconsidered.

Writing of his artistic method, Conrad asserted that 'it is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature."[2] It is only via less definite means that something of reality is truly effected. Obscurity, for Conrad, is not a muting of meaning. It constitutes a significant part of his artillery of representation and expression.

Critics have tended to misapprehend Conrad's obscurity as indicative of "something else". They approach the obscure quality of his description in two distinct ways. Certain critics have felt that Conrad's writing part reveals and part conceals a hidden significance.[3] Peter K. Garrett writes, 'there are brief, peripheral

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[1] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 177.
[2] Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Dent, 1950), pp. vii - xii (pp. xi – xii).
[3] Conrad writes of himself in the exact same terms, stating in *A Personal Record*, 1912 (Malboro, Vermont: The Malboro Press, 1988) that the author only partly discloses himself in fiction: 'He

glimpses of a hidden central meaning, partial, enigmatic revelations around which consciousness winds the wandering, circling, yearning movement of its imaginative faculty.'[4] Enigma in Conrad, for these critics, is the concealment of a deeply buried truth, a meaning resident in the heart of darkness. The other branch of critical approaches regularly speaks of Conrad's obscurity as 'foggy', 'misty', or 'hazy'. Rather than conceal an object, these obscurities are deployed to express the variously perceived, "greater" thematic concerns of the text. John. W. Griffin, for instance, writes that 'the fogginess in Conrad's African landscapes is not evoked in order to obscure, but rather to depict as realistically and poignantly as possible the dislocations of colonial experience.'[5] The 'fogginess', then, is minion to the western experience of the "other"; it is accessory to the methodologies of post-colonial interpretation. Bernard Shaffer, by a similar turn, argues that the apparent 'foggishness or mistiness [...] far from being a defect in Conrad's style, is meant to suggest civilization's now intriguing, now mystifying power: its ability both to impress its subjects with its magnificence and to blind them to its true motivations.'[6] Obscurity, here, has been rescued from the condemnation of 'defect', and placed instead in the service of the great machinery of ideology.

Obscurity in Conrad, therefore, is rarely treated as a central concern. Rather, its formlessness renders it easily appropriated as a realm for locating other critical and thematic concerns, be they postcolonial, racial, biographical, historical, existential, philosophical, and so on. These approaches are indicative of the secondary regard for obscurity and, by extension, types of abstraction, as devices that serve a theme. Obscurity deserves, rather, to be looked at directly, as a significant literary innovation.

To examine the phenomenon in question – the move toward abstract representation in Conrad – the obscurity of his writing must be regarded as the

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remains, to a certain extent, a figure behind the veil, a suspected rather than a seen presence – a movement and a voice behind the draperies of fiction' (p. 3).

[4] Peter K. Garrett, *Scene and Symbol from George Eliot to James Joyce: Studies in Changing Fictional Mode* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 177.

[5] John W. Griffin, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma*, p. 44.

[6] Bernard W. Shaffer, *The Blinding Torch: Modern British Fiction and the Discourse of Civilisation* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 6.

point of fascination, and maintained, to a certain extent, as obscure. Ian Watt's citation of Monet is illustrative of the need for this approach:

> "Poor blind idiots. They want to see everything clearly, even through the fog!" For Monet, the fog in a painting, like the narrator's haze, is not an accidental interference which stands between the public and a clear view of the artist's "real" subject: the conditions under which the viewing is done are an essential part of what the pictorial – or the literary – artist sees and therefore tries to convey (p. 170).

The Impressionist does not attempt to obscure the view of "reality": the obscurity is the subject of the painting. J. M. W. Turner was a forerunner of the Impressionist movement in pictorial art. His work is also significant to the move away from description and verisimilitude as the primary mode of representation.

Two paintings evince the stark contrast of Turner's earlier realism and his later progression toward the abstract, and both share Conrad's fascination with the awesome power of the sea. *Dutch Boats in a Gale*, 1801 [*Figure 4*], is an early

Figure 4: *Dutch Boats in a Gale*, 1801, by J. M. W. Turner.[7]

work. The emotive quality of this painting is drawn from a "realistic" depiction of the gale blowing in from the left of the composition, encroaching upon the lighter aspect. The jeopardy is effected by the clash of light and dark, the boats on the water, the tipping, converging waves, and the dramatic narrative of the scene. Verisimilitude and "fact", here, are the forces behind the painting's effect. *Slave Ship*, 1840, [*Figure 5*] is typical of Turner's later style. The differences from his earlier style is – in force, palette, and mode of representation – dramatic. The brush strokes are freer and broader; they whirl and eddy, merging the contours and lines of the subject matter into a state of virtual indistinction. The colours appear

Figure 5: *The Slave Ship*, 1840, by J. M. W. Turner.[8]

[7] ⟨http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-dutch-boats-in-a-gale-the-bridgewater-sea-piece⟩

more invented than actual, subjective and emotive. Whilst the facts of the event reported are hazier than in the earlier painting, the atmosphere and sheer dramatic splendour achieve a compelling resonance. Many would, and indeed have, argued that the later painting is more forceful in its effect than the earlier style. Subjective preferences aside, however, the point to be taken is that the second painting is not less representative of "reality" than the first. Its appeal is not to the realism of description, but the realistic *effect*.

The description of these later paintings in David Piper's *The Illustrated History of Art* as 'fantastic puzzles' is misleading.[9] The titles of Turner's paintings alone are indicative of their subject. More misleading, however, is the mode of depiction itself. If the painting is 'foggy', then the lack of clarity is, as Monet suggested, integral to the subject and representation. Piper's reference to 'puzzles' is reminiscent of the critical response to Conrad's obscurity. Conrad regards himself as having been 'understood as completely as it is possible to be understood' in a world 'which seems to be mostly composed of riddles'.[10] Whilst the notion of comprehending a human being is far more complex than that of a painting, the same principle applies to the obscurity of each.[11] Regarding the 'mistiness' and the 'haze' of Conrad's writing ought not be an act of seeing past, through or behind, it ought to be a focal point itself.

II

[8] ⟨http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/slave-ship-slavers-throwing-overboard-the-dead-and-dying-typhoon-coming-on-31102⟩

[9] David Piper, *The Illustrated History of Art* (England: Hamlyn, 1994), p. 320.

[10] Author's Note, in *The Mirror of the Sea and a Personal Record*, ed. and introd. by Zdzislaw Najder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, repr. 1989), p. xxxv.

[11] In a letter to Richard Curle, Conrad wrote in defence of retaining a degree of ambiguity in art. 'It is a strange fate', he said, 'that everything that I have, of set artistic purpose, laboured to leave indefinite, suggestive, in the penumbra of initial inspiration, should have that light turned on to it and its insignificance (as compared with, I might say without megalomania, the ampleness of my conceptions) exposed for any fool to comment upon or even for average minds to be disappointed with.' In *Conrad to a Friend: 150 Selected Letters from Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle*, ed. and introd. by Richard Curle (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1928), p 142.

Conrad's obscure representation has not previously been termed abstract. As certain critics (Ian Watt and John G. Peters, for example), as well as the previous illustration, have demonstrated, though, it has been profitably understood as Impressionist. Seeing Conrad's obscurity through an Impressionist lens not only encourages a preservation and consideration of these aspects in their own right, it reveals the emphasis Conrad placed upon sensorial experience over intellectual apprehension.[12] This thesis owes much to the understanding of Conrad's aesthetic as Impressionist, and my association of Conrad with abstraction ought to be regarded as a development rather than a contradiction of this prior approach to his work. As with the Impressionist lens, thinking of his aesthetic as abstract realises his obscurity as a stimulus for sensorial experience, rather than a prompt for cerebral interpretation. Aligning Conrad's aesthetic with the later developments in visual culture, however, reveals similar concerns in his work to those of the abstract artists. Thinking of certain aspects of Conrad's writing as abstract allows for a greater understanding of the relationship between his aesthetic innovations and philosophical vision. By calling Conrad's obscurity abstract and aligning it with the concept of the ineffable and the metaphysical, his aesthetic becomes entangled in the wider intellectual upheavals of the turn of the century.

A survey of the Modernist usage of the term "abstract" proved, in the previous chapter, an effective means for gauging the popular understanding of the concept. Prior to the abstract art movement, the general understanding of the term tended to situate the concept of abstraction outside of the visible, tangible world. A survey of the term "ineffable" is equally telling, revealing that it tended to be figured in a similar way. As with the conventional definition of the abstract, the "ineffable" was, (and still is), associated with a metaphysical, and sometimes divine, realm located beyond the bounds of articulation.[13] Though the application of the term "abstract" – in the modern aesthetic sense – to Conrad's earlier writing

[12] More will be said of this at a later stage in the chapter.

[13] Professor Gilbert Murray, for example, said of numerous strands of western philosophy that 'they were all trying to say the same ineffable thing; all lifting mankind towards the knowledge of God.' The ineffable equates here to knowledge of the divine truth; the unspeakable essence that transcribes all. In 'A Pagan's Creed: Sallustius's *De Diis et Mundo*', in *The English Review*, ed. by Ford Madox Hueffer, 13, 4 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1909) ⟨http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/11834630831562 5.pdf⟩ [accessed 20 March 2011], p. 13.

is anachronistic, its earlier association with the ineffable proves invaluable for understanding Conrad's obscure representative mode. The non-representative quality of the obscure episodes and aspects of his writing relates them to the figuration of both the abstract and ineffable as divorced from external, visible reality. Levenson marks this connection when he writes:

> The fragility of identity, the barriers to knowledge, the groundlessness of value – these great Conradian (and modern) motifs appear most often in terms of a sensory derangement that casts the individual into unarticulated space, a space with no markers and no boundaries, with nothing behind, nothing above, nothing below.[14]

Levenson's notion of an 'unarticulated space' corresponds to the metaphysical realms figured by late nineteenth century conceptions of the abstract and ineffable. In 1907, the critic E. Wake Cook wrote that in George Sterling's poetry there is 'a sense of mystic vastness, a stretching out to the infinities, and an effort to make language go beyond itself and express the ineffable.'[15] There is a sense, therefore, that Conrad's use of obscurity is an attempt to 'go beyond' the limitations of descriptive articulation. In this way, his obscure aspect can be said to be an invocation of the ineffable.

In his preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Conrad presented the revelation of truth as the fundament of his art. In nineteenth-century Western philosophical discourse, the concept of truth is bound up with the character of the ineffable and the abstract. Conrad's concept of truth is also intertwined with the semiotics of these terms. Though he apparently subscribes to aspects of the established philosophical and linguistic discourses, an examination of the complex relationship between these three ideas – truth, abstract, ineffable – reveals a significant divergence from these conventional discourses. Traditionally, concepts of truth, the abstract, and the ineffable are situated in the metaphysical realm. As

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[14] Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, repr. 1995), p. 5.
[15] E. Wake Cook, 'The Purpose of Art', cited in a Letter to the Editor, 21st January 1915, in *The New Age*, 12, 16 (London: The New Age Press, 1915) ⟨http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1140814348873511.pdf⟩, [accessed 31 March 2011], p. 327.

the definitive pitting of the abstract against the concrete evinces, this term (and those related to it) is conceived of as separate from the visible, phenomenal world. Conrad's concept of truth, however, is not abstracted into absolutes. Nor is it located in an ineffable, divine realm. Rather, his abstract mode of representation firmly locates concepts of truth and ineffability in the visible world. The conflation of these two conventionally opposed spheres – the phenomenal and the metaphysical, the perceptible and the ineffable – identifies Conrad's representative mode as a conscious break from linguistic and philosophical conventions, and a harbinger of the modern age.

Conrad's artistic creed ostensibly figures the text as dualistic, a dyad consisting of surface and subsurface. This aligns his vision with the dualistic tradition of Western philosophy. Art is defined by Conrad as 'a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect'.[16] Truth is initially located here behind the veil, below the obscuring surface of life's flux and form. He associates the artist's endeavor with 'very truth', 'true meaning', the 'fundamental', 'glimpse[s] of truth', 'rescued fragment[s]', 'reveal[ing] the substance', 'a moment of vision.' Conversely, the material (visible world) is spoken of as 'enigmatical', a 'mystery', 'passing', 'obscured by mists', 'obscure lives'. Conrad apparently subscribes to a conventional division of the world perceived and the world of truth: surface and subsurface, respectively. This dualism corresponds to the conceptual frame of most Western philosophical and theological traditions. Conrad's hidden truth can be equated with Plato's forms; the obscurity of his reality, with Plato's cave. Christian morality depends upon a framework of binaries: good and evil, heaven and hell, the tangible mortal life and the transcendental afterlife (to list but a few). These can also be said to parallel the duality of Conrad's notion of a fundamental truth and the chaos of existence. The Cartesian concept of the mind/ body distinction – the non-material, governing aspect of the mind versus the material, external aspect of the body – also corresponds to the concept of a reality behind appearances. Art, therefore,

[16] Preface to *The Narcissus'*, p. vii.

provides a portal for reaching the secret, hidden truth that underlies the surface of the visible world.

Conrad's famous preface, however, is not a straightforward extension of the binary structures that characterise Western epistemology. Whilst a dualism is established by the oppositional language, the prevailing theme is one of complication rather than dyadic distinction. 'Truth' itself is defined in elusive terminology. Whereas the concept of truth rests, for the 'thinker' or the 'scientist', upon 'ideas' and 'facts' that gain legitimacy via their 'appeal to our credulity', Conrad asserts that 'it is otherwise with the artist' (p. vii). Rather, the endeavour of the artist is to appeal to 'that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition'. This appeal is 'less distinct, more stirring – and sooner forgotten'. The underlying truth for Conrad is an indescribable essence that 'binds together all humanity', past, present, and future (p. viii). There is a universality and an egalitarianism to Conrad's 'truth'; it is not, however, posited as an absolute. Unlike the thinker, the scientist, and the Western traditions that depend upon the segregation of opposites, Conrad's truth depends upon a lack of distinction, so that it might evoke the ineffable essence of being. He writes,

> The aim of art, which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult – obscured by mists. It is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult (pp. xi – xii).

Significantly, the 'aim of art' is likened to 'life itself'. Conrad here aligns 'truth' with its supposed other, the 'visible world'. By extension, the 'truth' that art aims at is, like life, 'obscured by mists.' It cannot be drawn out of its obscurity by 'clear logic', nor can it be 'unveiled' by the laws that govern the visible world. In fact, the only definite assertion made in this artistic manifesto is that of the difficulty and obscurity shared by life, and art's aim (of depicting the essence of that life). Conrad is not claiming for his art the power to explain the underlying truth governing existence. Despite the grandiose existential language he is not peddling philosophy. Rather, he insists upon the power of art to arrest from the

'remorseless rush of time' a 'fragment' that, for a 'moment', renders the ineffability of our existence a tangible reality.

Conrad's approach toward his art, therefore, is not conceptually synonymous with the philosophical traditions of the past. Rather, he pioneers a new and complicated regard for 'truth' not as ultimate, nor as absolute, but as an ineffability to be experienced sensorially rather than apprehended intellectually. The following quotation is the line most regularly cited by critics as Conrad's statement of his art:

> My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything (author's emphasis, p. x).

The assertion that, in granting glimpses of the 'truth', he attempts 'no more' than a sensorial experience, tells of Conrad's avoidance of making claims to the absolute. That sensorial experience is asserted as 'everything' suggests 'truth' – as conceived as an absolute, fundamental explication of the visible world – to be conceptually fatuous. Based on this denial of absolute truth, the critical quest for hidden truth or fact within the ambiguities of Conrad's fiction is redundant. Conrad's means of catching at the fundamental ineffability of existence demands, by its very nature, a peculiar, abstract, ambiguous mode of representation.

III

Reading Conrad's abstraction in relation to Wilhelm Worringer's concept of the abstract reveals the relativistic (as opposed to absolute) quality of his vision. In his evaluation of the 'psychology of style', Worringer distinguishes between the 'urge to empathy' and the 'urge to abstraction' in artistic representation and appreciation.[17] Empathy is concerned with the 'reproduction of the truths of organic life', though is not to be confused with the urge to imitation, or 'copying the natural model' (p. 11 and p. 12). Rather, it transcends the basic description of

[17] Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, p. 4.

verisimilitude toward depicting 'naturalism in the higher sense' (p. 14). The empathetic urge is symptomatic of an accord with nature, of man's synthesis and contentment with the visible world. The urge to abstraction, on the other hand, is 'the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world'; it is a reaction against the external, organic reality (p. 15). The abstract form guards against the flux and confusion of the external world. The urge of those who seek refuge from appearances was, 'to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate to its *absolute* value' (author's emphasis, p. 17).

Worringer articulates the dichotomy between empathy and abstract in a discourse of regression and progression. The tendency toward the abstract is rooted at the 'beginning of every art', and is therefore associated with 'primitives' and 'savages', and peoples deemed to be less evolved. Those who stand spiritually and cognitively lost in the face of the external world experience 'only obscurity and caprice in the inter-connection and flux of the phenomena'. In their need for sense, they impart 'a value of necessity and a value of regularity' upon the things of the external world (p. 18). This mode of interpretation is mainly manifest through the use of singular-dimension lines and geometric pattern. This process of abstraction, however, 'does not make use of any natural object as a model' (p. 20). Writing of primitive man's urge for abstraction Worringer claims that:

> In the necessity and irrefragability of geometric abstraction he could find repose. It was seemingly purified of all dependence upon the things of the outer world, as well as from the contemplating subject himself. It was the only absolute form that could be conceived and attained by man (p. 36).

The notion of a purified, absolute form is reminiscent of the art of Mondrian. The extraction of the plane from three-dimensional space, the block simplification of colour, and the (apparently) referentless geometric composition were said, by

Mondrian, to be the expression of 'pure reality', 'a truth for all time'.[18] Whilst Worringer agrees with the notion of an absolute form, however, he rejects the suggestion that this conveys a truth relating to the visible world. For Worringer, the abstract is, by necessity, divorced from natural, tangible existence. Empathy, on the other hand, derives from the development of a 'confidence between man and the external world', as 'the result of innate disposition, evolution, climatic and other propitious circumstances' (p. 45).

Worringer's attribution of 'empathy' to a more evolved, advantageously located individual firmly situates his approach in a post-Darwinian discourse. It also engages with – and to a certain extent, antagonises – the concurrent preoccupation in the art world with heralding the merits of (previously dismissed) 'primitive' art. One mustn't over simplify his position in relation to abstraction in visual culture, however. Worringer is careful to distance the urge to empathy from imitative, descriptive representations of nature. Naturalism, in the plastic arts, and realism, in literature, are taken as 'identical concepts' in their realisation of the urge to empathy. However, these must, he writes, 'be sharply distinguished from pure imitation of a natural model. For here lies the point of departure for numerous misconceptions in the modern outlook on art' (p. 26). Rather, naturalism is defined by Worringer as 'approximation to the organic and the true to life', but not because the artist desired to render the 'illusion of a living object' (p. 27), rather it was the essence of that vitality that the artist strove after:

> The psychic presupposition was, therefore, not the sportive, trite joy in the concordance of the artistic with the object itself, but the need to experience felicitation through the mysterious power of organic form, in which one could enjoy more intensely one's own organism (p. 28).

The aesthetic experience of naturalism, though embedded in the visible world, is of an ineffable, mysterious quality. The aim of the empathetic artist is to stimulate via his art the pleasure one experiences of 'the mysterious power of the organic form'. Worringer seems unable to articulate this power beyond its effect,

[18] Piet Mondrian, 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art', p. 353.

rendering the representation of the visible world as both inscrutable and fundamental to man's experience of himself.

The ineffable quality of Worringer's concept of naturalism apparently relates Conrad's representation of the visible world to empathy. For Worringer, the empathetic experience is based upon a symbiosis between man and the naturalist work of art. In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, the relationship between the men of the ship and their immeasurable surround is akin to the symbiotic, ineffable relationship that forms the basis of Worringer's empathetic experience.

In closing, the narrator asks, 'haven't we, together and upon the immortal sea, wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives?'.[19] (p. 136). Posed in rhetorical form, this unanswered statement hopes for meaning, but neither reader nor narrator is rewarded directly. Rather, the inherent skepticism of the question dissolves meaning entirely, cementing the bond between crew and surround in their mutual lack of significance. According to Worringer, empathy occurs when the formal processes within the work of art correspond 'to the natural organic tendencies in man'. These connections allow the individual, 'in aesthetic perception, to flow uninhibitedly with his inner feeling of vitality […] into the felicitous current of this formal happening' (p. 33). There is a silent communion between the organic representation and the individual. Man's perception of his self and his aesthetic experience of the work of art merge in this interminable process of exchange. Consequently, he is:

> borne along by this inexpressible, inapprehensible movement, he experiences that absence of desire which makes its appearance the moment man – delivered from the differentiation of his individual consciousness – is able to enjoy the unclouded happiness of his purely organic being (p. 33).

In an inscrutable, 'inexpressible' process, man escapes the equivocality and confusion of his conscious existence, and achieves clarity and 'happiness' through identification with his organic surround. Crucially, both the process and epiphany

[19] Joseph Conrad, 'The Nigger of the *Narcissus*', in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and Typhoon and Other Stories*, ed. by J. H. Stape and Allan H. Simmons, introd. by Gail Fraser (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 1 – 136 (p. 136).

of this communion are held as ineffable. They are experienced in emotive and sensorial terms, rather than intellectual or cerebral. Both parties in this communion – man and work of art, hidden consciousness and visible world – are bound by a common ineffability. This ineffable, sensorial bond corresponds to Conrad's depiction of the intersecting realms of man and sea.

But Worringer's clear distinction between the ineffable, metaphysical experience of empathy versus the concrete, rational reduction of the abstract cannot be transposed onto Conrad's dualistic vision. In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Conrad muddles and exchanges the various characteristics that Worringer separates and divides in his concepts of empathy and abstraction. In this novella, Conrad complicates the visible aspect with a sense of ineffability. A reading of this complication reveals the character and concept of Conrad's abstraction, and demonstrates its fundamental irreconcilability with Worringer's idea of the abstract.

The 'Narcissus' is narrated at the point of conflict between the converging spheres of the tangible and the ineffable. The journey of the *Narcissus* begins thus:

> The passage had begun: and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet. Round her the abysses of sky and sea met in an unattainable frontier. A great circular solitude moved with her, ever changing and ever the same, always monotonous and always imposing (p. 25).

As a 'fragment detached from the earth', the ship is distinguished as a tangible, concrete object of the visible world. Like a planet in space, the realm through which the ship journeys is conceived as an abyss: formless, inscrutable, and abstract. The setting's lack of topography suggests it as more metaphysical than tangible; even the boundary between sea and sky is abstracted as 'an unattainable frontier.' The character of this abstract surround is contrary: 'ever changing and ever the same'. It is 'unattainable' and yet 'always imposing.' The seascape setting is more than mere foil, backdrop, or frame to the narrative; these terms transcribe only a two-dimensional plane. Unlike the settings of Victorian realists, it is not passive,

nor merely the complement of the action, events, and mood of the narrative. Rather, in *The 'Narcissus'*, the atmosphere generated by the setting is paramount to the thematic concerns of the narrative. Whereas the ship is figured as a microcosmic 'fragment' of the earthly realm, the realm of the sea is conceived of as a metaphysical, cosmic other. The merging and interaction between these two spheres corresponds to the preface's blurring between the visible world and truth, and, by extension, Conrad's development of the concept of the abstract and ineffable. The complication of these separate spheres (metaphysical and concrete) destabilises conventional certainties, and refigures reality as based upon relativity and uncertainty.

The divinity conventionally ascribed to the ineffable is a necessary casualty of the complications between the realms of the earth and the sea. In line with the gradual secularisation of society, Conrad secularises the concept of the ineffable. He imbues aspects of the visible world with a sense of the invisible; the characteristics usually associated with a metaphysical, ineffable realm "beyond" are resituated within and applied to the apprehensible realm.[20] His narration of the seascape in *The 'Narcissus'* demonstrates this.

Conrad conveys the essentially metaphysical, ineffable quality of the sea by speaking of it in terms that exceed and confound definition:

> And the immortal sea stretched away, immense and hazy, like the image of life, with a glittering surface and lightless depths; promising, empty, inspiring – terrible (p. 122).

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[20] In his Preface to *The Shadow-Line*, in *Conrad's Prefaces to his Works*, ed. by Edward Garnett (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), pp. 173 – 176, Conrad wrote against the existence of the supernatural, declaring it to be but 'a manufactured article, the fabrication of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living, in their countless multitudes; a desecration of our tenderest memories; an outrage to our dignity.' Rather, he locates the 'marvellous' in 'nature', within the 'dominion of our senses', and the 'visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part.' He argues that '[t]he world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is; marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state' (p. 173). The marvellous, metaphysical, and inexplicable aspects of his writing, therefore, ought not be attributed any unearthly (supernatural or divine) significance. For Conrad, nature – in this instance, the sea – was suitably inexplicable to be thought of in characteristics more usually given to the supernatural.

With each attribution, the sense of ambiguity increases. As 'immortal' and stretching 'away' the sea extends beyond the bounds of determination that describe objects of the tangible realm. It is contrary – 'promising', though 'empty', 'inspiring', yet 'terrible' – which paradoxically charges it with the possibility of nothing and everything. The 'glittering surface' contrives a concrete aspect, which is promptly undermined by the 'lightless depths' that disconcert the integrity of the visible, known facet. Conrad narrates the sea in terms that thwart logic in their contradiction, and exceed boundaries in the immensity and inexactitude they promote. The seascape is extra-dimensional, it exceeds quantification, delineation, or definition. The visible – the sea – is imbued, then, with a sense of the invisible – the ineffable, the metaphysical – as it exceeds definition, and goes beyond the bounds of common perception. As Conrad likens his image of the sea to 'the image of life', he situates the notion of "reality" and "truth" within this metaphysical, amorphous aspect. Characterised by the ineffable, metaphysical, and 'life', the sea is accorded the same associations given to a conventional understanding of the "abstract" aspect of (dualist) reality. But Conrad avoids encumbering this image with a sense of the divine. Though his depiction of an 'immortal', 'measureless' sea tempts a theological interpretation, by situating these qualities in the familiar, visible, and apprehensible world, Conrad de-divinises the concepts of the ineffable, metaphysical, and abstract (p. 78). Instead, he appropriates the characteristics associated with a traditional, philosophical dualism to communicate something of his own vision.

A traditional dualism locates truth in the realm outside of perception, in the 'lightless depths'. The 'glittering surface', or world of appearances, is, conversely, characterised as limited, and the locus of ignorance. The idea of truth and ignorance are central to the tale of *The 'Narcissus'*, and, in his narration of each, Conrad engages with a traditional dualistic frame. But truth and knowledge, sham and ignorance are confused in this story; the dualistic frame works to achieve a sense of complication, rather than a sense of clarity.

Singleton represents an older generation that is characterised as 'inarticulate and indispensible', 'profound and unconscious', 'meditative and

unthinking' (p. 22, p. 103, p. 23). These contrary couplings posit and preserve inscrutability as central to Singleton's character. He is defined through contradictions, and, as such, is enigmatic despite his supposed simplicity and ignorance. Whilst he seems in one instance 'to know nothing, understand nothing', elsewhere he is depicted as sage, and possessed of 'a sharper vision, a clearer knowledge' (p. 35 and p. 102). His 'unspeakable wisdom' signifies a knowledge that cannot be communicated, only experienced. The following vignette illustrates that elusive knowledge, as Singleton stands on the deck of the *Narcissus*:

> Till then he had been standing meditative and unthinking, reposeful and hopeless, with a face grim and blank – a sixty-year-old child of the mysterious sea. The thoughts of all his lifetime could have been expressed in six words, but the stir of those things that were as much part of his existence as his beating heart called up a gleam of alert understanding upon the sternness of his aged face (p. 23).

Singleton's existence is a composite of an 'unthinking, reposeful' consciousness and an 'alert understanding' of and symbiosis with the sea. Whilst the thoughts of his lifetime amount to no great sum or significance, his surrogate connection to the 'mysterious' sea renders him somehow profound and masterful.[21] This association imbues him and his life with a sense of "something more" than a rational language – the tool of the novelist, here wryly reduced to a mere 'six words' – could hope to express.

Set against this old sailor is a new generation of sailors whose oppositional character helps to establish a dualism. Whereas the old generation are 'the everlasting children of the mysterious sea', 'their successors are the grown-up children of a discontented earth' (p. 22). Singleton's generation are of the ineffable realm, whereas Donkin's are of the earthly, tangible realm. The former are content in their ignorance, the latter, seek out truth. The question of Jimmy's health - whether sham or real – impresses upon the new generation of sailors with

[21] Further down he commands the ship in reaction to the weather: ' "You…hold!" he growled at it masterfully, in the incult tangle of his white beard' (p. 23).

far greater weight than it does upon Singleton. They veer between 'pity and mistrust', and the threat of that 'ever-expected visitor of Jimmy's' interferes daily with their 'occupations', their 'leisure', and their 'amusements' (pp. 30 – 1). When Jimmy is 'shamming', the crew opt to believe he is, indeed, dying. Jimmy's sham is then exposed, and he determines himself toward good health. But the narrative is convoluted. From the moment of revelation and restoration to reality, the previous 'sham' henceforth becomes the truth. Despite his commitment to another untruthful existence – this time, that of his good health – the reality of Jimmy's situation is now apparent to all. The knowledge and certainty of his impending death bestows upon the crew a peculiar authority and wisdom: 'we had the air of being initiated in some infamous mysteries; we had the profound grimaces of conspirators, exchanged meaning glances, significant short words' (p. 110). The acquisition of certainty in the face of the blind uncertainty of their oceanic surround is covertly treasured as valuable, but destructive information. They endeavour to maintain the illusion that sustains Jimmy's untruthful existence. Donkin, however, yearns to expose the truth:

> [He] felt this vaguely as a blind man may feel in his darkness the fatal antagonism of all the surrounding existences, that to him shall ever remain irrealisable, unseen and enviable. He had a desire to assert his importance, to break, to crush; to be even with everybody for everything; to tear the veil, unmask, expose, leave no refuge – a perfidious desire for truthfulness! (p. 118).

The stalemate between truth and ignorance is narrated as a 'fatal antagonism', an interminable tension between various conflicting dualisms: the unseen and the seen, underlying truth and apparent surface. Donkin rejects the affected ignorance of the other sailors, but an exposure of the truth, however, signifies a breaking of faith, a 'perfidiousness'. Realising the truth would necessitate, for Donkin, the virtual destruction ('to break, to crush') of his contingent; there is a sense that it is irrealisable in this context. Owing to his allegiance to the sea rather than the sailors, Singleton can speak (what he perceives to be, at least) the truth. He cites Jimmy as the 'cause of the headwinds', and maintains that mortally sick men 'linger till the first sight of land, and then die' (p. 112).

Given the antagonism between ignorance and truth, and their association with the earth and sea, it is apt that Donkin resigns himself to a life confined to land and that Singleton is committed to the 'depths of an hospitable sea'. 'So be it!' the narrator declares, '[l]et the earth and the sea each have its own' (p. 136). The figure that sought 'truthfulness' is bound to the earth, and the figure that accepted ignorance, is bound to the sea. But the engaging symmetry of this dichotomy is misleading. The ineffable quality of the sea implies a greater truth; Singleton is, at times, both regarded and proved sage. The moving fragment of the earth, the *Narcissus*, is not impermeable to the invasive surround; its crew too, reminded of 'their dependence upon the invisible', are ultimately subject to the realities imposed upon them from this external, unfathomable power (p. 115). This muddying and merging of conventional opposites effects something of the contemporary philosophical and scientific destabilisation of absolute truth, in exchange for theories of relativity, flux, and chaos.

Given the mystical, ineffable quality of the sea, aspects of Conrad's writing might be related to Worringer's concept of empathy. But whereas Worringer's dualistic frame pitches abstraction against empathy and, by extension, the ineffable, in Conrad's dualism, concepts of the abstract and the ineffable become intertwined. In part, this association of the ineffable with the abstract derives from Conrad's appropriation of a traditional, philosophical dualism. In his illustration of the mystical immeasurable sea, he draws upon the character of the metaphysical aspect of a traditional dualism. Both the ineffable and the abstract are conventionally situated in that realm; both can be thought of as opposed to the world of appearances. Unlike Worringer's understanding of the abstract as a limitation, a reduction, the ineffable quality of Conrad's abstraction realises it as an expansion. But whilst he invokes certain characteristics of a philosophical dualism he doesn't subscribe to that vision of reality. By muddying the boundaries, and exchanging certain characteristics of this conventional dualism, Conrad undermines the notion of absolutes, presenting instead a vision based upon relativity. Worringer presents abstraction as a process of ordering and reduction, of purification and absolutism. His concept of aesthetic abstraction, then, is

evidently irreconcilable with Conrad's view that 'everything is relative' and nothing absolute.[22] Conrad's innovation of an abstract aesthetic doesn't allow for the same reassurance, order, or definition that Worringer's does. It operates instead to effect a sense of disorientating and dynamic flux. The sense of bewilderment that derives from Conrad's dualistic play crucially realises something of his vision of reality in the structure and character of his aesthetic.

IV

Language was one of the many structures that fell victim to the discourses of uncertainty and relativity that coursed through contemporary scientific and philosophical developments. Conrad's aesthetic mode is an articulation of, and a response to this. As notions of fixed meaning and essential absolutes were stripped from the collective consciousness, so too was the certainty associated with linguistic communication. The question of how to faithfully represent this destabilised reality using a destabilised language significantly contributed to Conrad's innovations in representation.[23] As language was acknowledged to be non-absolute the aesthetic preference for verisimilitude became a less dependable, and less "true" means of representing reality. Conrad's innovations in story-telling obscure the mimetic aspect typical of nineteenth-century realism, positing, rather, a sensorial aesthetic experience as "more real" than that of imitative, visual description.

For Conrad, the only means of rendering reality in language was to effect something of its metaphysical quality. 'All creative art', he writes, 'is magic, is evocation of the unseen in forms persuasive, enlightening, familiar and surprising, for the edification of mankind, pinned down by the conditions of its existence to

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[22] Conrad, 'Henry James – An Appreciation – 1905', in *Notes on Life and Letters*, 1920 (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2008), pp. 10 – 14 (p. 11). Ian Watt confirms the relativity of his vision, writing that, for Conrad, 'the "essence of life" remained much more irreducibly plural, public, and contingent' (p. 185).
[23] Of his tireless literary innovations and experimentations with language, Joseph Warren Beach describes Conrad as 'the most restless and ingenious experimenter of his time, the one who brought the greatest variety of technical procedures to bear upon the problem of the novelist', in *The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique* (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1932), p. 337.

the earnest consideration of the most insignificant tides of reality.'[24] He figures 'creative art' in a language that veers between concrete rendering – a process of edification, of pinning down – and a sense of a metaphysical "something else" – 'magic', and the 'unseen'. The abstract aspects of Conrad's writing designate a reality ungoverned by rational systems of language and logic, effecting, therefore, a sense of the 'unseen' dimension in the frame of his writing. Watt identifies Conrad's expressive idiom as 'intended to be inaccessible to exposition in any conceptual terms' (p. 197). If the language, the concept, and the form of Conrad's representative mode is bewildering, then we may infer that the reality conveyed is essentially bewildering. By pushing the bounds of representation, Conrad is able to convey something of the complication, vexation, and mutability of man's experience of the anarchic, destabilised world. Madsen writes of *Heart of Darkness* that, 'in the last instance the meaning is the absence of meaning […] the signification of all the signifying relations is the lack of signification.'[25] The purported meaninglessness of Conrad's obscure aspect not only engenders frustration with the conventional language of communication, but also attempts to overcome the very limitations that it reveals.

Whilst the *Narcissus* is an object that condenses and contains life, the 'immeasurable' sea imbues that life with an ineffable sense of "something more". In lieu of an idiom adequate to their experience, the narrator and sailors defer to the sea:

> The problem of life seemed too voluminous for the narrow limits of human speech, and by the common consent it was abandoned to the great sea that had from the beginning enfolded it in its immense grip; to the sea that knew all, and would in time infallibly unveil to each the wisdom hidden in all the errors, the certitude that lurks in doubts, the realm of safety and peace beyond the frontiers of sorrow and fear (p. 109).

In some ways the 'problem of life' is an authorial problem: this passage almost

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[24] 'Henry James', p. 11.

[25] Peter Madsen, 'Modernity and Melancholy: Narration, Discourse and Identity in *Heart of Darkness*', in *Conrad in Scandinavia: Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, ed. and introd. by Jakob Lothe (Lublin, Poland: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, 1995), pp. 127 – 154 (p. 150).

reads as a justification of Conrad's invocation of an ineffable, metaphysical dimension. Language is confirmed, here, as insufficient for full expression of the 'problem of life'. Truth, in a sense, cannot be unearthed through a ratiocinative process. Rather, the crew of the ship defer to the immensity of silence and of the 'great' sea. Silence, like the contrary sea, contains the possibility of nothing and everything, of expansion and contraction. These allied spheres posit an abstract, ineffable realm unfettered by the constraints of conventional communication and understanding. The inapprehensible, inexpressible sea is the locus of the inapprehensible, inexpressible 'problem of life'.

In a letter of 1897, Conrad wrote that in *The 'Narcissus'* he had 'tried to get through the veil of details at the essence of life."[26] The tangible detail ascribed to the earthly ship is displaced by a mode of representation that, in its approach toward conveying the true essence of existence, ironically does so through a process of complication and mystification. The notion of representation as elucidatory and descriptive is challenged by this preference for the amorphous, inexacting realm, wherein the narrative locates the true 'essence of life'. Descriptive words are inadequate for relaying what is truly and ineffably felt: 'all the simple words they knew seemed to be lost for ever in the immensity of their vague and burning desire. They knew what they wanted, but they could not find anything worth saying' (p. 106). Phenomenological existence and experience of the visible world is, for Conrad, an 'enigmatical spectacle'.[27] In his development of a language of the unspeakable and the inexpressible, he effects something of the enigma of existence.

V

There is no doubt that Conrad's aesthetic is Impressionist. Ford Madox Ford cemented this when he wrote of his and Conrad's technique that:

> We saw that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We

[26] Letter to Miss Watson, 27th January 1897, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters I*, ed. by G. Jean-Aubry, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1927), I, p. 200.
[27] Preface to *The 'Narcissus'*, p. vii.

> in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions.[28]

In their emphasis of 'effect' and 'impression', aesthetic experience is advanced as "more real" than intellectual apprehension. In their abandonment of the structured systems typical of realist narrative techniques, they promote the senses over the cerebral, the subjective over the objective, thus reflecting the principles of Impressionist painting. John G. Peters confirms these shifts, writing that:

> Conrad rejected the absolute world of realism and the scientific century that spawned it and insisted instead upon the relative world of Impressionism with individual experience and human subjectivity at its core.[29]

By identifying realism with the 'absolute' and Impressionism with the 'relative', Peters registers Conrad's aesthetic innovations as a response to shifting concepts of reality. It would be erroneous to displace our understanding of Conrad as Impressionist with an abstract aesthetic. As I argue in my chapter on Virginia Woolf, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism are closely related, both tending to emphasise subjective experience over objective apprehension. To divorce them absolutely would be to deny the origins of the Post-Impressionist movement, and to ignore the various concepts and effects they share.[30] There are, however, certain advantages in considering some of Conrad's Impressionist techniques and effects in relation to the form and concept of abstraction.

Conrad's 'effect' is, in certain moments, contingent upon the interplay between opposites. It is this 'double vision' that I argue is profitably interpreted as abstract. The 'relative world of Impressionism' that Conrad seeks to create a sense of in his writing is realised by his appropriation and adaptation of a philosophical dualist model. The ways in which he appeals to this model and reimagines it

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[28] Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London: Duckworth, 1924), p. 182.
[29] John G. Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism*, p. 160.
[30] In 'Retrospect', in *Vision and Design*, pp. 199 – 211, Roger Fry expressed his regret at having too emphatically divorced the Post-Impressionists of his 1910 exhibition 'from the parent stock', the Impressionists, writing that 'I see now more clearly their affiliation with it' (p. 203). The relationship between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism will be discussed at greater length in my chapter on Virginia Woolf.

demonstrate a certain engagement with a traditional, philosophical understanding of the abstract, as well as a development of that concept. Not only does the interplay between opposites effect something of abstraction in the philosophical sense, but his conflation of independent aspects realises something of the cubist aesthetic in his writing. The 'double vision' of some of Conrad's Impressionist techniques associate his aesthetic with the concept of abstraction in the visual and philosophical sense. By aligning certain aspects of his writing with the abstract, we can more confidently claim Conrad as a pioneer of Modernism.

Conrad's manipulation of narrative perspective conflates the omniscient, objective viewpoint typical to Victorian realism with the limited, subjective, participating narrator, more typical of Modernism.[31] *The 'Narcissus'* begins with the grand surveying, indifferent perspective of the omniscient narrator. The seamen are observed from outside, the viewpoint remains uncomplicated by any individual, subjective strain. As the tale progresses, however, the narrator emerges as a character implicit in the action of the narrative. He gradually defines himself with the subtle interweaving of subjective terms such as 'our' rather than 'they': the first instance of which appears in the line, 'Mr Baker grunted in a manner bloodthirsty and innocuous; and kept all *our* noses to the grindstone' (my emphasis, p. 27). It requires a keen eye, from this point on, to discern which of the two posited voices is speaking. The switch between use of subjective or objective referents alerts us to the switch in narrative voices. During the mission to rescue Jimmy, for example, the perspective regularly shifts from the uninvolved to the involved narrator. These shifts are signified by successive pronouns such as 'they' – 'all' – 'we' – 'us' – 'our' (pp. 52 – 4). In this scene, the narrator becomes

[31] Critics have identified the dual apparency of realist qualities and Modernist technique. In 'Conrad and Modernism', *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, edited by J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 203 – 222, Kenneth Graham identifies Conrad's narrative as in some ways paving the path toward Modernism, and in others, clinging to the literary traditions of the nineteenth-century: '[t]he presence of a pragmatic, observing, realist's eye always persists in Conrad, even when so much of his tendency […] is to convey the under-lying dream effect that erodes the normal solidity of the world' (p. 204). Levenson, in *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, notes this split loyalty as characteristic of the modern novel: '[o]ne of the great concealed dramas of the modern novel is the struggle between certain enduring traits in literary character and certain innovations in narrative structure, the contest between a notion of fictional self inherited from nineteenth-century precedents and the new literary forms designed to contain it' (p. xii).

one of the rescue party, engaged in the drama of the situation. It is not until the closing paragraphs of the tale, however, that we experience a definite characterisation of the subjective narrative figure. Here, the narrator identifies himself in the first person, and, for the first time, engages directly in conversation with another character. Back on land, he is accosted by Belfast in the street. Determined to avoid this confrontation, the narrator reports that:

> I disengaged myself gently […] I wasn't anxious to stand the brunt of his inconsolable sorrow […] "So long!" I said, and went off (p. 135).

The omniscient narrator's perspective can be achieved only through a detached, transcendental position outside of the narrated action. The subjective narrator, on the other hand, is situated in the action; he is implicit in the drama, and his perspective depends upon the fact of his own tangible existence.[32] The split between these two narrators – the transcendental objective and the tangible subjective – structures a dual aspect akin to traditional, philosophical dualism.

Ford wrote that the main tenet of an Impressionist narrative 'was the suppression of the author from the pages of his books. He must not comment; he must not narrate; he must present his impressions of his imaginary affairs as if he had not been present in them.'[33] The complicated, dual narrative aspect of *The 'Narcissus'* helps to prevent a transparent reading of the text as emanating directly from an author. The concluding voice identifies itself as a palpable character by an allusion to personal physiognomy ('I disengaged myself') and by expressing a unique emotional attitude, distinguished from the conglomerate attitude of the crew ('*I* wasn't anxious to stand the brunt'). This rendering of the narrator as a character in the action, both silences and eclipses the omniscient voice. This latter voice is often equated with that of the author, so, by extension, the authorial

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[32] In *A Genealogy of Modernism*, Levenson argues that the move away from an omniscient narrator places greater emphasis upon the physical aspect: 'it is clear that the conventions of omniscience were breaking down, and that one result was an increased dependence on evocative physical description' (p. 5).

[33] Ford, cited in Max Saunders, 'Fiction as an Art: Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford', *The Oxford History of the Novel in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 55 - 71 (p. 57).

voice is stripped from the narrative of *The 'Narcissus'* in the last. Thus the Impressionist vision (according to Ford, at least) is realised.

The sustained presence, however, of an omniscient as well as a fallible narrator engineers a double vision that shares certain characteristics with a traditional philosophical dualism. The omniscient narrator corresponds to the abstract, universal aspect, whereas the fallible narrator corresponds to the relativistic world of appearances. The interplay and almost seamless transition between these voices, however, effects a convergence between the two perspectives, undermining the traditional dualistic segregation. Crucially, the subtle switch from one voice to another – via propositions and perspective – helps to maintain a sense of homogeneity, rather than a schism. By simultaneously deploying two incongruous viewpoints and presenting them along a single plane, this renegotiation of a traditional dualism aligns this aspect of Conrad's writing with a cubist aesthetic. Like the Cubists, Conrad's seamless presentation of independent, incongruous perspectives as one vision pushes the boundaries of common perception. In his subtle negotiation (and, to an extent, reconciliation) between these two oppositional perspectives – from the universal to the local, the illimitable to the limited – Conrad expands beyond the usual parameters of aesthetic experience. By conveying the experience of both an omniscient overview and a firsthand perspective, Conrad challenges the reader to match his own expansive vision of human experience.

Conrad's conflation of conventionally opposed binaries is one of the most significant types of abstraction in his writing. *Lord Jim* is structured on the basis of this complicated double vision. A reading of these conflated antagonisms will add to the abstraction – both aesthetic and conceptual – that foments Conrad's Impressionistic mode.

VI

In a letter to the *New York Times*, published 24th August 1901, Conrad defended the tenets of his art in terms of his tenets of existence. He asserted that

there are no fundamental absolutes governing existence, no incontrovertible principles determining reality. 'The only indisputable truth of life', he wrote, 'is our ignorance.'[34] Truth is synonymous with enigma. It is not something that can be explained; nor is it explicative of something outside of itself. Existence, for Conrad, is determined by the alliance of two binaries: '[e]goism, which is the moving force of the world, and altruism, which is its morality'. Ironically, these conflicting forces are conflated. Conrad writes,

> these two contradictory instincts of which one is so plain and other so mysterious cannot serve us unless in the incomprehensible alliance of their irreconcilable antagonism.

The oxymoronic nature of the latter half of this quotation expresses one of Conrad's modes of abstract expression. For Conrad, 'the only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic.'

Conrad's art approaches life in terms of the unknown: our knowledge and perception are irrefutably limited. In conventional language, binaries demark the boundaries of expression and meaning. Light and dark; good and evil; us and them: all transcribe a communication based upon fixed terms, each dependent upon its opposite for meaning. In rejecting the notion of an existence defined by absolutes, Conrad also rejected the fixed meaning imposed by binary opposites. Rather, he conflates conventionally opposed binaries in a mode of communication akin to his existential concept of 'incomprehensible alliance[s] of irreconcilable antagonism[s]'. These oxymoronic alliances destabilise normative denotation and connotation, and, as such, are a mode of abstract representation. *Lord Jim* contains many of the conflated binaries thematically and linguistically typical to

[34] Joseph Conrad, "The Inheritors". – A Letter from Joseph Conrad, 24th August 1901, *New York Times Archive* ⟨http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F00D12F83D5F12738DDDAD0A94D0405B818CF1D3⟩ [accessed 15 February 2014]

Conrad's writing.[35] What follows is an examination of this text for explication of this particular abstract mode.

VII

In *Lord Jim*, subjective experience and factual description are both modes of conveying a sense of reality. Throughout, the narrative forces the reader to consider the irreconcilability of subjectivity on the one hand, and fact on the other. This tension materialises at the official inquiry into the fate of the *Patna*. The judicial process conflicts with Jim's perception of the incident. Marlow recalls that, '[t]hey wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could

[35] Critics have variously identified Conrad's handling of the dual aspect. In *The Blinding Torch*, Bernard Shaffer writes of *Heart of Darkness* that meaning accrues through the 'invocation and then subversion' of dichotomies (p. 56). Shaffer regards Conrad's invocation and innovation of 'cliché dichotomies' as progressive, stating that, 'to know something, as structuralism holds, one must know its opposite as well. Yet Conrad's fiction presages post-structuralism with even more precision, as the line dividing the above cliché oppositions dissolves before our very eyes, the farther into the narrative we read' (p. 66). Shaffer, therefore, regards the boundaries between binaries as 'dissolving', effecting Conrad's moral posture as 'dialogic', as opposed to absolute. In *Scene and Symbol*, Peter K. Garrett regards Conrad's dual aspect as inherently symbolic, stating that 'with *Heart of Darkness* we have arrived at a point in the development of fictional modes where symbolism has clearly become the primary vehicle of meaning' (p. 171). Garrett concludes that Marlow's consciousness is the symbolic embodiment of the 'unresolved tensions between incompatible meaning which run through Conrad's work.' Conrad's structures of significance, therefore, are preeminently symbolic, though resolutely unstable, and thus deny the possibility of a 'univocal' reading of the text (p. 177). In 'Modernity and Melancholy', Peter Madsen also interprets Conrad in symbolist terms, arguing that '*Heart of Darkness* presents a fragmentary condensation of the symbolic systems that were taken for granted […]. They are vehicles for the formulation of experience, but at the same time the experience tends to destroy these systems of symbolisation by opening a gap between discourse and experience' (p. 142). Meaning is rendered unstable as a result of the conflict and negation of symbolic systems of significance. Mark A. Wollaeger too, in *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), regards Conrad's handling of duality as 'potentially self-cancelling' (p. 18), whilst Levenson, in *A Genealogy of Modernism*, relates to Madsen as he also regards consciousness as the repository of meaning and value following the 'disintegration of stable balanced relations between subject and object' (p. 22). The one consensus between these disparate interpretations is that Conrad's dual aspect is an innovation that marks him as a turning point in literary history, in the move toward Modernism. None, however, identify this conflation of binaries as a manifestation of the abstract, nor do they suggest it as a new mode of representation: a move away from the conventions of description toward abstraction. An examination of the aesthetics of Conrad's dual aspect is paramount to understanding the significance of this unconventional and abstract mode of representation. The critical tendency, however, favours the metaphysical and psychological over aesthetics or semiotics. Many regard Conrad in terms of his own, and that of society's, anxieties associated with consciousness. This risks reducing Conrad's thematic and linguistic concerns to internalized, existential soliloquys, and marginalises the broader philosophical, semiotical and literary aspects.

explain anything!'.[36] Jim, however, is anxious to convey 'something else besides' the 'visible, tangible' facts, 'something invisible, a directing spirit of perdition that dwelt within, like a malevolent soul in a detestable body' (p. 22). The facts, in this instance, suffice to convey the tangible events of the incident. They supply the narrative with its outward form, drawing the 'fourteen-hundred-ton steamer and twenty-seven minutes' into a spatio-temporal dimension. The 'true horror behind the appalling face of things', however, is not communicable through fact (p. 21).

'Ideas' are presented in *Lord Jim* as the allies of subjectivity and the adversary of fact. The former is associated with individual, ideational consciousness, and the latter, with the collective, unthinking consciousness. Just as facts are decried, however, so too are ideas. Marlow articulates this sentiment:

> Hang ideas! They are tramps, vagabonds, knocking at the backdoor of your mind, each taking a little of your substance, each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy! (p. 32).

Ideas destroy the few simple notions that sustain the unconscious, unthinking collective. Similarly, Conrad, in a letter to Cunninghame Graham, decries ideas. *The 'Narcissus's'* Singleton is, he writes 'in perfect accord with his life' because he does not possess consciousness. He continues,

> Would you seriously, of malice prepense, cultivate in that unconscious man the power to think? […] Would you seriously tell such a man "Know thyself! Understand that you are nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream?"[37]

An existence based upon unthinking subscription to fact offers respite from the dark intangibility of consciousness. Implicit in both these quotations, however, are both of these existences. Marlow and Conrad invoke one dimension to denounce

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[36] Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale*, 1900, ed. and introd. by Jacques Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 21.
[37] Conrad, Letter to Cunninghame Graham, 17th December 1897, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 215.

the other, yet, in doing so, acknowledge the existence of both: conscious, ideational existence, and unconscious, unthinking existence.

Fact and subjectivity are variously elucidatory and obscurative: of one another, and of "the truth" of a representation. Marlow's inclination toward first hearing and then re-telling Jim's experience is in some ways an attempt to assert subjectivity as the 'truth' of the matter. Jim's experience is, however, contingent upon a basis of incontrovertible fact. Marlow remarks that,

> The truth seems to be that is it impossible to lay the ghost of a fact (p. 142).

Jim jumped from the ailing *Patna*. This is the incontrovertible fact that transposes all experience that follows in the narrative. Though Jim is able to tell Marlow the 'things he could not tell the court', the basis of these things is the same residual 'ghost of a fact' that underlies the concern of the inquiry (p. 62). Whilst objective representation is rendered impossible and fallacious, subjective representation is impossible without the facts that govern external existence. In a letter to Barrett H. Clark, Conrad wrote that: 'I am always trying for freedom – within my limits.'[38] In this way, Conrad's conflation of the subjective and objective acknowledges the bounds that limit the imagination and experience.

Subjectivity and fact correspond with the individual and social dimension respectively.[39] The tension between the individual and their relation to society is central to *Lord Jim*. During the inquest, Marlow observes that Jim 'held his shoulders upright above the box while his soul writhed within him' (p. 23). Jim is conflicted in his sense of duty toward external strictures and the maintenance of outward form, as well as the incomprehensible forces that govern him as an individual. His upright shoulders are an expression of governed order, and his writhing soul, of ungoverned chaos. Kenneth Graham identifies a contradiction in Conrad: '[o]n the one hand, Conrad's belief in order, duty, solidarity, and, on the other hand, his intuitive perception, more like an obsession or a dream than a

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[38] Letter to Barrett H. Clark, 4th May 1918, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 204.
[39] In 'Fiction as an Art', Max Saunders writes that 'the antagonism between egoism and altruism roughly correlates with the individual and the social dimension' (p. 66).

conscious belief, of some primary chaos that negates all order, duty, and solidarity.'[40] The critical tendency to regard this aspect of Conrad's writing as a contradiction can be misleading. Rather than contradiction, it is more useful to think of this as a tension.[41] The suggestion that Conrad's depiction of the relationship between fact and subjectivity, community and the individual, is one of contradiction suggests a relationship of fixed binaries. Fact and subjectivity in this view are therefore 'irreconcilable antagonisms'. In *Lord Jim*, however, these binaries are conflated; the relationship between these oppositional spheres is complicated; the irreconcilable antagonisms are incomprehensibly allied. Viewed as a contradiction, one still understands Conrad's double vision as the mirror and preservation of a traditional dualism. Understood as a tension and a complication, however, one appreciates Conrad's appropriation and revision of this traditional dualism as a crucial means of realising his particular vision.

At the inquest Jim outwardly adheres to the community's concord of order, solidarity, and fact, and yet inwardly and individually suffers the chaos and abstraction of subjective experience. In his person, therefore, these conventionally antithetical, contradictory aspects – order and chaos, fact and subjectivity, individual and society - are conflated, though not reconciled. Marlow confesses that it was the complication of vision that elicited his alliance to Jim:

> He appealed to all sides at once, - to the side that turned perpetually to the light of day, and to that side of us which, like the other hemisphere of the moon, exists stealthily in perpetual darkness, with only a fearful ashy light falling at times on the edge (p. 68).

The image of the moon here figures the seeming impossibility of an alliance between irreconcilable antagonisms. The notion of a single being having simultaneous access to all sides of a sphere is a physiological impossibility. Yet, this image is posited by Marlow as a "true" representation of Jim's appeal. This

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[40] 'Conrad and Modernism', p. 215.

[41] Staging a contradiction in Conrad in language similar to Graham, Michael Levenson writes that in his preface to *The 'Narcissus'*, Conrad makes: 'on the one hand, […] a rousing rhetorical call for the sensory apprehension of life's surfaces; on the other, he demands inwardness and depth.' Of this dual conflict, however, Levenson is careful to point out that 'this is a tension, not a contradiction.' In *A Genealogy of Modernism,* p. 1.

appeal is founded in the position Jim occupies between the sphere of community – the side 'perpetually in the light' – and the sphere of autonomy – 'the other hemisphere', in 'perpetual darkness'. Jim embodies this oxymoronic coupling of separate spheres, but the true source of fascination is that he engenders this conflation in his fellows too.[42] Conrad's aesthetic here is akin to the kaleidoscopic perspective of the cubist vision. Publishers tend to select realist images to represent Jim on the cover of this book. The most recent Oxford World Classic edition selected the following painting of *Sir James Brooke* by Francis Grant, for instance [*Figure 6*]:

Figure 6: *Sir James Brooke*, 1847, by Francis Grant.[43]

Whilst this relates to the nineteenth-century spirit of adventure that characterises *fin de siècle* literature and, to some extent, Conrad's tale, it hardly relates to the aesthetic or conceptual presentation of Jim. Given Jim's simultaneous appeal to 'all sides at once', and the presentation of both light and dark along a single plane, something like Jean Metzinger's *Portrait of Albert Gleizes* might actually be a more appropriate visual rendering of this character [*Figure 7*].

Marlow, like Jim, becomes caught between these various antagonisms. Marlow allies himself with the community that is held together by conventions of toil, fidelity, and conduct. He questions his motivation for 'grubbing into the deplorable details of an occurrence which' concerned him 'no more than as a

Figure 7: *Portrait of Albert Gleizes*, 1912, by Jean Metzinger.[44]

[42] In *The Metaphysics of Darkness: A Study in the Unity and Development of Conrad's Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971), Royal Roussel writes that, 'for Conrad's ironic characters and narrators', there is a tension 'between their initial commitment to the world of men and action and their awareness of a darkness which nullifies the validity of this world' (p. 26). Roussel, however, regards the relationship between these two antagonistic spheres as prescriptive of the bounds and limitations of Conrad's world, stating that: 'this polarity between a commitment to the dream and an acceptance of the darkness determines the limits of the whole spectrum of Conrad's characters', and this polarity marks 'the limits of Conrad's fictional world' (p. 27). As these spheres are actually conflated, they can no longer be regarded in terms of polarity or opposites. The boundaries are elided, therefore speaking of limitations in this conventional sense is inappropriate for the dynamics of the semiotics and imagery. Indeed, Madsen more accurately describes these destabilised opposites as 'a crisis of delimitation' (p. 142).

[43] ⟨http://www.mantex.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Conrad_Jim.jpg⟩

member of an obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct' (p. 37). Yet, as an individual, he wishes to 'find something', 'some shadow of an excuse', that would explicate and somehow vindicate Jim's contravention of the moral code that binds man to man. The object of the enquiry, we are told, 'was not the fundamental why, but the superficial how, of this affair' (p. 41). These "superficial" facts provide a reassuring concrete narrative, but Marlow contravenes the bounds transcribed by his community, as he seeks to discover 'why' the incident happened as it did. This involves penetrating the aspect of the individual, rather than the community to reach a realm characterised not by concrete fact, but rather, the intangible, 'a *shadow* of an excuse' (my emphasis). In retrospect, Marlow states that,

> I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible – for the laying of what is the most obstinate ghost of man's creation, of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death – the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct (p. 37).

Marlow hoped his investigation into the subjective would reinstate the sovereign power of the 'fixed standards' of community. The language used to convey the alternative, 'secret' doubt that uprises 'like a mist', avoids definite figuration. The subversive actions of Jim as an individual stem from a 'doubt'. To express a doubt, one must have in mind the supposed truth upon which uncertainty has been cast. Contained in the 'doubt of the sovereign power' therefore, is the subjective and the objective, the individual and community, chaos and order. Sovereign power no longer stands in absolute isolation; it now plays host to the significance of its irrefragable, doubtful other.

Jim is identified by Marlow as 'one of us', a fellow of the community contingent. The repetition of this designation punctuates the narrative at regular intervals, effecting a tone of simultaneous reassurance and doubt. Because of this

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[44] ⟨ http://uploads7.wikiart.org/images/jean-metzinger/portrait-of-albert-gleizes-1912.jpg⟩

association, however, Jim's individual aspect is, by contrast, starkly apparent. It was as though:

> he had been an individual at the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception if itself.…(p. 68).

The notion of Jim as a pioneer is interesting, given that the imagery selected for speaking of the individual, subjective aspect is characterised by a dark, unfathomable otherness. It is as though he were leading the 'one of us' contingent in an expedition toward the unfathomable, abstract aspect of self, towards the 'obscure truth'. The suspicion that this 'obscure truth' might be located in a sphere that is other to the conventions of mankind's conception of itself tells of the tension that exists between the individual and community.

For Conrad and Marlow, the bonds of community exist not just for social preservation, but for self-preservation. 'If only we could get rid of consciousness', Conrad wrote to Cunninghame Graham.[45] The 'unconscious man' is guarded against the abyss of consciousness by an epistemology structured on the basis of contingency, surface, and order. Jim's foray into the depths below the surface, however, urges doubt upon the sphere of community, and the veracity of that epistemology. Days after presiding over the official inquiry, Brierly commits suicide. Marlow remarks, 'apropos of Jim, I had a glimpse of the real Brierly a few days before he committed his reality and sham together to the keeping of the sea' (p. 49). The 'reality' that Marlow perceives is that of an individual all too aware of his own consciousness, who has found himself cast adrift from the tenets of a contingent, unthinking – 'sham' – existence. The question of reality and 'mankind's conception of itself', therefore, is located at the epicentre of these two conflated spheres: of the individual and community.

VIII

[45] Letter to Cunninghame Graham, 31st January 1898, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 226.

The locus of "truth" or "reality" is ambiguous in *Lord Jim*. The tension between the outward face of the community versus the inner consciousness of the individual calls the veracity of each aspect into question. Fact, like subjective experience, can both illumine and obscure perceived reality. The novel's dualisms are complicated further by Conrad's confusion of the boundaries between the visible world and the invisible, the tangible and the metaphysical.

Jim seems somehow estranged between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the metaphysical. The truth of his existence and his relation to reality is therefore contentious. In what can retrospectively be deemed a proto-Modernist flourish, Marlow draws attention to the narrative qua narrative: 'He existed for me, and after all it is only through me that he exists for you' (p. 162). Even in this affirmation, Marlow's meta-narrative unsettles the notion of a fixed existence: Jim's 'being' is said to be encased in a 'mist'. On occasion, Marlow glimpses 'him' - his true self - through a 'rent' in this mist (p. 93). For the most part, however, Jim remains obscure, and the narrative takes on a dreamlike quality:

> At that moment it was difficult to believe in Jim's existence [...] but his imperishable reality came to me with a convincing, with an irresistible force! I saw it vividly, as though in our progress [...] we had approached nearer to absolute Truth, which, like Beauty itself, floats elusive, obscure, half submerged, in the silent waters of mystery (p. 156).

Reality is depicted here in an abstract language more usually associated with the metaphysical. Jim's earthly, phenomenal existence, is paradoxically described in terms more suited to the realm beyond sensory perception. This particular conflation is akin to the studied parallels between the earth and the sea, and between sham and reality in *The 'Narcissus.*' The merging of the visible with the invisible dislocates and destabilises concepts of reality and existence. When Marlow is struck by Jim's 'imperishable reality', it is as though an 'absolute Truth' has been glimpsed. Truth, reality, and existence, therefore, occupy the same realm. But this tangible realm is described in the type of enigmatic terminology normally ascribed to the metaphysical: 'elusive, obscure, half-submerged, in the

silent waters of mystery.' This world of the senses is invested with an abstract, metaphysical sheen.

Marlow acknowledges the interrelation of the abstract and concrete realms with the assertion that: '[w]e exist only in so far as we hang together' (p. 162). 'We' are the 'one of us' contingent, whose very reality is threatened by breaking from the bracket of order and duty. Similarly, it is said of Jim that 'once he got in [to Patusan], it would be for the outside world as though he had never existed' (p. 168). Jim abandons the 'outside world' and its manifest epistemology for a psychologically and topographically 'inner' world, and is therefore eradicated from the collective memory. The language here is revelatory. In going 'in' to Patusan, Jim goes 'out' of civilisation, and out of existence. Yet the epiphanic moments in which the mist that surrounds Jim is said to be 'rent' - revealing the essence of Jim's reality and existence - are also transcribed in spatial terms as a "going in" or "penetrating beyond". Existence is experienced, therefore, as a communion between the outward visible world and the metaphysical realm beyond/ within. "Truth" and "reality" also suffer the same complication, as they too are situated simultaneously within and without the tangible and metaphysical, objective and subjective realms.

IX

One of the most significant tensions in *Lord Jim*, and throughout Conrad's *oeuvre*, is that between flux and form. Conrad articulates this tension in a letter of 1898:

> Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore: thoughts vanish: words, once pronounced, die: and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow.[46]

[46] Letter to Cunninghame Graham, 14th January 1898, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 222.

The flux and uncertainty that is generated by man's interminable ignorance is countered by structure and form. Words, belief, faith, and thoughts, all construct a barrier against the ultimate fact of man's limited knowledge. Form, in this context, appears temporal, whereas the abstract element suggests eternity. The ephemeral aspect, however, is more indicative of a sentiment of futility, as the indefatigable tension between form and flux in *Lord Jim* indicates. Marlow posits the necessity of each when he narrates that, 'for a moment I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder, while, in truth, thanks to our unwearied efforts, it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive […]. I seemed to have lost all my words in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale' (p. 228). The collective behind the 'unwearied efforts' are the 'one of us' contingent, and the 'small conveniences' they conceive of are the rational structures of order, duty, and contingency that describe and transcribe the visible world.[47] The 'chaos of dark thoughts' is located 'beyond the pale' of these epistemological structures. There is a sense of the dislocated individual occupying this chaotic realm of disorder: a view that certainly coheres with much of the associative imagery in the rest of the text. This tension between form and flux, therefore, corresponds to that of community and individual, and by extension, the other conflated binaries that characterise the imagery and thematic concerns of the text.

Words, for Marlow, 'belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge', and, as such, are a mode of rescuing sense from the incomprehensibility of being (p. 228). But 'light and order' are, throughout the text, conflated with darkness and chaos. Words and their assignations of meaning become fluid and interchangeable with their conventional opposites. Flux, in a sense, comes to dominate and negate the structures and forms. Marlow's description of the occult power of the moon tells of this dynamic:

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[47] Max Saunders identifies fluidity in Conrad as a source of anxiety: '[t]he insubstantiality of our perceptions and our consciousness – and of the attempt to make us *see* them – makes Conrad seek form and substance to take a firm hold of' (author's emphasis, p. 65).

> It is to our sunshine which – say what you like – is all we have to live by, what the echo is to the sound: misleading and confusing whether the note be mocking or sad. It robs all forms of matter – which, after all is our domain – of their substance, and gives a sinister reality to shadows alone (p. 178).

The sunshine is synonymous with the realm of light and order, and the moon is a synonym for the shadowy realm of flux and chaos. The latter distorts the former. It robs it of the matter that constitutes its form, and therefore could be said to negate its very existence. And yet, both facets of this binary are maintained by the metaphor. The moon is said to be what 'the echo is to sound', it is the shadow to the sun's light. Both sun and moon are limited, each defined by the other: the anarchy of flux is tempered by form, and form carves order out of flux. This conglomeration exemplifies the constraints that Conrad habitually places on his language. Linguistic indeterminacy is both a limitation and a challenge. It illustrates the inadequacy of any singular perspective or mode of expression to encompass the full variety of human experience, while simultaneously enjoining novelist and reader alike to discard conventional idioms and fustian habits of mind. The liminal point of intersection between two conflated binaries is, like Jim, an appeal to all aspects of meaning at once, 'the side that turned perpetually to the light of day, and to that side of us which, like the other hemisphere of the moon, exists stealthily in perpetual darkness'. These kaleidoscopic visions license multiple meanings.

X

Existence in *Lord Jim* is conditioned by the text's oxymorons. Jim is narrated at the point of convergence between various colliding spheres. His character is fraught by the tensions between the individual and the community, fact and subjectivity, the tangible and the metaphysical. As the embodiment of these conflated opposites, Jim is an expression of the limitations and the freedom that these conflicting spheres simultaneously transcribe.

Jim's rehabilitation in Patusan is circumscribed by these oxymorons. In Patusan, he simultaneously lives an existence of independence and dependence, of autonomy and contingency. His geographical and psychological relocation outside of the bounds of his own civilisation releases him from the fetters of the crime that came to define him. However, all the aspects that make Jim a 'master' outside of his indigenous civilisation make him 'a captive too' (p. 180):

> Jim the leader was a captive in every sense. The land, the people, the friendship, the love, were like the jealous guardians of his body. Every day added a link to the fetters of that strange freedom (p. 190).

Jim abandoned the 'outside' world of collective consciousness in order that he might absolve his own consciousness. His move to Patusan – located in the 'interior' and defined as "other" – divorces him from the conditions that denied him freedom of consciousness.[48] This new position of autonomy ought, therefore, to be synonymous with freedom. And yet Jim is said to be 'imprisoned within the very freedom of his power' (p. 205).[49] Like the concept of 'Truth', freedom is at once ascribed to both and neither realm of exterior and interior, society and individual, civilisation and "other". Jim expresses his love for his new situation in conflated egoistic and altruistic terms: with 'a sort of fierce egoism, with a contemptuous tenderness' (p. 180). Marlow corroborates Jim's move from the community toward individuality, stating that, 'of all mankind Jim had no dealings but with himself' (p. 246).[50] Despite his independent existence, however, Jim is still governed by the incomprehensibly allied forces of egoism and altruism. The question remains as to whether true, unfettered freedom, is attainable in any realm.

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[48] During one of Marlow's encounters with Jim (prior to his relocation to Patusan), he observes Jim's need and inability to 'withdraw', to 'be alone with his loneliness' (p. 123). In this fraught position, Marlow observes that it is as though Jim were 'bound and gagged' by invisible forces, thus demonstrating the limitations confining Jim within the context of his own civilization and society.

[49] This is reminiscent of Conrad's proclamation (cited above): 'I am always trying for freedom, within my limits.'

[50] There is scope for arguing that in the social hierarchy of Patusan Jim becomes a member of another community, and thus an adherent of new standards and codes of conduct. This is yet another instance of conflated spheres, as the conventionally autonomous and chaotic other is depicted in the same terms as its "civilised" foil.

There is, at least, no resolution to be found in Jim's transgressions into and beyond these various antagonistic spheres of existence.

Stein casts the fundamental condition of Jim's existence as a conflicting binary. The conflict between a life governed by empiricism and conversely, by idealism, forms the basis of Jim's malady.[51] After hearing Marlow's narrative of Jim's predicament, Stein's pronouncement is that 'he is a romantic' (p. 153). Jim is caught between the dream of his own existence, and the actuality of it. His jump from the *Patna* is not just a violation of the collective moral and ethical code, it is an opportunity missed, the chance to be a hero, gone. Stein claims to suffer remorse as Jim does, saying to Marlow, 'do you know how many opportunities I let escape; how many dreams I had lost that had come in my way?' (p. 156). Stein reveals a crucial axis that could be extended as the founding sentiment of much of Conrad's writing. The conflict between romanticism and empiricism is not a statement of existential angst, it is part of the discourse on 'how to be' (p. 153). The other conflicting binaries in the text might also be taken to contribute toward this debate.

Stein states that 'we want in so many different ways to be' (p. 153).[52] What mode of existence ought one subscribe to? What sphere ought one occupy? Where do truth and reality reside? Stein's answer to this conundrum implies a necessary compromise between conflicting realms and aspirations:

> A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns […]. The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up (p. 154).

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[51] In a valuable comparison between Conrad and Schopenhauer, Wollaeger demonstrates that both are caught between idealist and empiricist understandings of reality (*Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*). These modes of understanding, Wollaeger argues, remain unresolved in the philosophies of both authors.

[52] A reading of this line is based upon the assumption that the sentence structure is flawed by Stein's slightly affected attempts at speaking English: his word order seems confused. Rather, it ought to be read as 'we want to *be* in so many different ways.' This reading seems justified considering the awkward ordering of the sentence that follows: 'but man he will never on his heap of mud keep still.'

The note supplied by Jacques Berthoud on this quotation argues that Stein deems Jim's heroic aspiration as rendering him unfit for life, which is 'a realm of becoming' and 'not of essence or being'. Rather, what Jim ought do is 'accept incompleteness, find an accommodation with imperfection, embrace the aspiring character of conscious life.'[53] Stein's instruction of 'how to be' is forged on the basis of destruction. In striving for air, man drowns; in submitting to destruction, he survives. The metaphor Stein uses for explaining this is strategically paradoxical, and thus relates to the conflicts that characterise the central question. Berthoud concludes his note saying that, 'unsurprisingly Stein falters, because "becoming" requires "being" just as […] darkness requires the light that destroys it'. Does Stein falter only in the wake of his statement? Given that the metaphor he uses pivots upon a paradox, it rather seems that his proclamation is characterised by an irreconcilable tension, an implicit 'faltering'. Stein, (and Berthoud to an extent), identifies being as inherently antagonistic. For Stein, however, the inherent tension sustains being; it is not ultimately destructive of it. Survival and destruction do not cancel each other out, they are allied as a fundament to sustaining one's existence. Jim's existence pivots upon similar paradoxical terms.

These oxymorons are not only made apparent through the characters and events of the novel, they are also realised in its imagery. The imagery of the passage where Stein describes the paradoxical essence of existence enacts the tensions implicit in Stein's speech.

In a conventional figuration, the conflict between light and dark would tend to represent illumination and obfuscation respectively. In this passage, however, the character ascribed to each is interchangeable and thus conflates the conceptual aspects of the terms. As Stein passes in and out of light and shadow, his attitude alters. Trailing off a sentence with the words 'in a dream….', Stein moves from the bright circle of light cast by the lamp, into 'the ring of fainter light – into shapeless dusk' (p. 153). Passing from one 'ring' to another adumbrates a virtual movement between spheres, and the transitional and contrasting imagery

[53] Jacques Berthoud, in Notes to *Lord Jim*, p. 323.

supports this. Stein passes from the 'concrete' to the 'shapeless'; his form is 'robbed of its substance' and a vocabulary of indefinitude conditions representation, as the deployment of the following words indicates: 'remoteness', 'mysteriously', 'voluminous', and 'no longer incisive'. This nebulous estrangement abstracts Stein, figuratively and visually. Yet, 'away' in the obscurity of the dark, Stein is inspired by 'some whisper of knowledge'.[54] The darkness is illuminating. As he passes once more into the 'bright circle of the lamp', the 'certitude seen in the dusk vanished'. The exposure to light destroys 'the assurance which had inspired him in distant shadows' (p. 154). The light obfuscates.

The aspect is further complicated, however, as the effect of Stein's conviction opens (for Marlow) 'a vast and uncertain expanse',

> as of a crepuscular horizon on a plain at dawn – or was it, perchance, at the coming of night? […] it was a charming and deceptive light, throwing the impalpable poesy of its dimness over pitfalls – over graves (p. 155).

This is a paean to ambiguity. The indistinct light of twilight could either be the gateway to light of day, or the darkness of night. The deceptive and dim light is liminal, bridging the spheres of light and dark, somehow embodying the qualities of both. Marlow quickly returns to this image, repeating and developing it. The crepuscular light is 'overshadowed in the centre, circled with a bright edge as if surrounded by an abyss full of flames.' The indistinct light becomes a sphere, simultaneously encompassing light and dark extremes. The bright edge is, in some ways, as unfathomable as the overshadowed centre that it circumscribes. The imperceptible centre is perceptible only by the encircling 'abyss full of flames'. The concept of an abyss as a circular surround is arresting: we more readily imagine a fissure or a cavity. The notion of an abyss – an unfathomable void - as defining another unfathomable void is paradoxical. Yet the image, despite its thwarting of conventional figuration and representation, is expressive and atmospheric. It communicates a sense, rather than an image. This crepuscular

[54] 'Away', here, represents again a notional 'other' realm or sphere.

image is, therefore, simultaneously figurative and non-figurative, light and dark, elucidatory and obfuscating.

The conflation of light and dark is but one example of the physical and spatial paradoxes that shape the abstract imagery in *Lord Jim*. The binaries of centre and edge; surface and depth; movement inward and outward, coincide in a way that obscures conventions of representation. Writing on *Heart of Darkness*, Levenson describes this mode of abstraction as 'the beyond within'.[55] He demonstrates Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness to be a simultaneous going to the centre and to the edge, a movement within and a movement without. 'Faced with the claim that *Heart of Darkness* represents a journey within', says Levenson, 'one must respond that it does so only by representing a journey without […]. Contrary to all logic, the centre is on the circumference; the middle is on the periphery, the heart of darkness lies on the border of experience' (p. 10). Jim's journey to Patusan is simultaneously a movement inward and a movement outward. It corresponds to spatial paradoxes of Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness.

The confounding of antithetical images has a significant bearing upon the concept of representation. The spatial realms normally thought of as separate are merged, and, as a consequence, conventional meaning and connotation is disavowed. In his interminable attempt to interpret Jim, Marlow reflects that 'as with the complexion of all our actions, the shade of difference was so delicate that it was impossible to say. It might have been flight *and* it might have been a mode of combat' (my emphasis, p. 142). Marlow expresses here the problems inherent in the attempt to interpret enigma. 'The shade of difference' invokes the crepuscular light that figures the convergence of light and dark. In the conflation of opposites – light and dark, fight or flight – a liminal space of intersection is implied. The *shade* of difference, therefore, is the point of intersection and convergence between two antithetical concepts or images. As he contemplates the two antithetical avenues of interpretation – fight or flight – Marlow does not distinguish the two as cancelling of each other. He does not distinguish them in terms of an 'or',

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[55] *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality,* p. 12.

rather, he locates them on the same axis, conjoining them with 'and'. In this way, Marlow demonstrates the impact of conflation upon representation. Binaries intend a bifurcated meaning: two opposite poles of significance that define the other whilst, by the same token, negating it. Conrad's conflated binaries, however, figure a expressive form free of the limitations of convention and full of the possibility engendered in enigma.

XI

Conrad described art as a process of rendering the unseen, the flux, the incomprehensible chaos of existence, in concrete terms and sensible forms, 'for the edification of mankind'.[56] Words, however, are for Conrad conceptually like the conflated binary. That is to say they are fundamentally equivocal. Graham writes that 'the whole force of *Heart of Darkness* seems from beginning to end fixed on challenging the idea of single meaning, and the related idea that the act of communication in words is reliable' (p. 213). The conflated binary can be regarded as a linguistic experiment, and, as such, a challenge to meaning as notionally fixed and limited. It disconcerts and undermines the conventional structures of meaning, and, therefore, verges on the obscurity that lies beyond the pale of form and language. Transcribing the unseen in concrete, linguistic form is, for Conrad, 'rescue work':

> this snatching of vanishing phases of turbulence, disguised in fair words, out of the native obscurity into a light where the struggling forms may be seen, seized upon, endowed with the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values – the permanence of memory.[57]

This 'native obscurity' is not brought into the light and crystallized by words; these only serve to 'disguise'. Words and their meaning are not concrete. The 'only possible form of permanence' is wrought, rather, in consciousness.

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[56] 'Henry James', p. 11.
[57] Ibid.

The complex relationship between words and ideas, concrete design and metaphysical vision, is implicitly debated in the dualistic interplay of *Lord Jim*. In the quotation above, the chaotic, ineffable realm of vanishing turbulence and obscurity is held in equal and relative value to the tangible realm of words and forms. These two opposites are conflated. 'Everything is relative', continues Conrad, but only 'the light of consciousness' is the 'most enduring of things of this earth' (p. 11). Consciousness is equivalent to the point of intersection between conflated binaries. Both figure a Janus-faced realm where the 'struggling forms' and 'vanishing phases of turbulence' simultaneously appeal to all sides at once. They are like the crepuscular realm, potential of both light and dark.

Though Conrad held a certain contempt for Nietzsche, his conflation of binaries is inescapably similar to a significant aspect of Nietzsche's moral philosophy.[58] Nietzsche denied the existence of oppositional absolutes, claiming instead that all is interrelated, all is relative. Alexander Nehamas explains this 'sweeping monism', stating that:

> Nietzsche wants to claim that truth and error, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil are not to be opposed to one another; on the contrary, he imagines them as points along a single continuum.[59]

This moral ambivalence enacts the equivocality prevalent in Conrad's conflated binaries. Nietzsche's monism (like Conrad's binaries), ostensibly eliminates all barriers to significance, committing meaning to the realm of anarchy and chaos. However, for Nietzsche, the essentially interrelated nature of all things intends that the character of things is derived 'from their interrelations'.[60] Meaning is therefore rescued from total flux and total fixity. The sphere in which the binaries relate (or in Nietzsche's case, the 'single continuum') implies both a freedom and a limitation: a freedom from the forms that dictate the limits of meaning, and a limitation and rescuing of significance from boundless ineffability.

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[58] Kenneth Graham records that Conrad 'disliked' Nietzsche, p. 206.
[59] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, p. 44.
[60] Ibid.

In his last act, it is not clear which force Jim acts upon. Marlow concludes Jim's story with the following question:

> But can we see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with the shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied – quite, now, I wonder? We ought to know. He is one of us' (p. 303).

Is he directed by the 'call of his exalted egoism', or by an altruistic 'ideal of conduct'? The conflated binaries that demonstrate the essential inscrutability of both Jim and the text are upheld to the last. If there is a significance to be gleaned from this abstract representation, it behoves Marlow's audience to establish it. Ultimately, however, reconciliation cannot be wrought from that which is essentially antagonistic, so perhaps the complication, as it is drawn, is the primary significance.

The conflation of binaries in *Lord Jim* do not *maintain* an ambiguity central to the narrative. Conrad deals with his subject in a way so profoundly beyond the compass of his tools that the central concern of the text is not something he is "shoring up", but rather, something beyond the conventions of description. The subject has ultimately occasioned the mode of representation; Conrad's abstract concerns have necessitated his abstract method. There is something interminable about Conrad's conflation of opposites. The dualistic play between these antagonisms, their simultaneous alliance and irreconcilability, effects an endless, paradoxical discomfort. They express, in some ways, the certainty of senselessness, and even helplessness. They realise Conrad's vision of the universe as a knitting machine, that 'made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart.' The universe 'is a tragic accident — and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it.' As composites of both aspects that conventionally transcribe existence – metaphysical and tangible – they are essentially the sum of all, they speak of everything. And yet, in their confounding

of conventional structures of signification and meaning, these allied antagonisms might be accused of speaking of nothing. As Conrad said of the blind universe:

> It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters.[61]

In his appropriation and subversion of traditional philosophical dualism, Conrad was able to realise something of his own pessimistic philosophy in the structure and aesthetics of his writing. But more than that; by unfettering meaning from its conventional bonds, Conrad realises his art, at least, as a source of irreducible experience.

XII

Conrad's innovations in story-telling significantly contributed to the development of the abstract aesthetic. At the time of his earlier period of writing, Conrad advised fellow author, Hugh Clifford, that 'the *whole* of the truth lies in the presentation; therefore the expression should be studied in the interest of veracity. This', he declared, 'is the only morality of *art* apart from *subject*.'[62] The presentation of truth was the force behind Conrad's particular mode of expression. The obscurity of his description, his invocation of the ineffable and metaphysical, and his conflation of absolutes, compose his artillery of representation. Each of these undermines the stability associated with the naturalist and realist traditions, which rendered reality through a description based on imitation, clarity, and fixed principles. In response to Arnold Bennett's *Man from the North*, Conrad wrote,

> I would quarrel not with the truth of your conception but with the realism thereof. You stop just short of being absolutely real because you are faithful to your dogmas of realism. Now realism in art will never approach reality. And your art, your gift, should be put to the service of a larger and freer faith.[63]

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[61] Letter to Cunninghame Graham, 20th December 1897, *Life and Letters*, I, p. 216.
[62] (Author's emphasis), Letter to Hugh Clifford, 9th October 1899, ibid., p. 280.
[63] Letter to Arnold Bennett, 10th March 1902, ibid., p. 303.

Conrad felt that the strictures of realism – its dogmas of imitation, and faith in absolutes – thwarted the fundamental purpose of art. The subscription of the realists to the conventional rules of depiction was akin to subscribing to the increasingly questionable "universal truths" hitherto held to define existence. Art, and art's aim – truth – ought to 'be put in the service of a larger and freer faith.' In the interest of veracity and in the face of a destabilised reality, therefore, he developed a mode of representation unfettered by the strictures of artistic and intellectual convention. Conrad, in effect, was developing a new realism, a new means of truly expressing the visible world.

Conrad's earlier literature, including *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *Lord Jim*, established the break from the association of the abstract with universal principles and fundamental truths. His later literature, *The Secret Agent*, for instance, established Conrad as a pioneer of the association of the abstract with a non-representative aesthetic, a property more commonly associated with pictorial art. A study of this progression in Conrad's mode of representation will demonstrate his key role in establishing geometric abstraction as a significant form for expression.

XIII

Even in Conrad's later works, the visible world is always figured in relation to an abyss. *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907, is no exception. In this book, the atmosphere of intrigue depends upon Conrad's evocation of the unknown. The persistence of this abyss is key to comprehending Conrad's contribution to the abstract aesthetic.

Darkness and silence pervade *The Secret Agent*, effecting something of the abyss that threatens the existence of each of the characters. As Mr Verloc is possessed by the 'sensation of an incipient fall',

> Down below in the quiet, narrow street measured footsteps approached the house, then died away, unhurried and firm, as if the passer-by had started to pace out all eternity, from gas-lamp to gas-lamp in a night without end; and the drowsy ticking of the old clock on the landing became distinctly audible in the bedroom.[64]

The figure-less passer-by, apparent only in sound, paces out the flat monotony of a 'night without end', evoking the abstract signification of an abyss. Inside, and also unseen, the clock echoes this meaningless repetition. The unseen, unknown quality of darkness gradually impinges upon the known, visible world. Verloc dreads 'facing the darkness and silence that would follow the extinguishing of the lamp' (p. 55). Mrs Verloc must also face this interminable darkness:

> She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk into hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out (p. 218).

The visible and the invisible are forever converging in Conrad. The 'streets and its mass of lights' are 'sunk into hopeless night', and the usually illuminating gas-lamps come to signify a 'night without end'. The known often devolves into the unknown, and the unknown, at times, becomes known.

The most resonant instance of this convergence of the known and the unknown is the refrain that punctuates the final few pages of the story. The last line of the article that reports the suicide of a 'Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat' reads:

> *An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair* (author's emphasis, p. 246).

The newspaper carrying this article is committed indefinitely to Ossipon's pocket, while the final line is permanently lodged in his memory. As far as 'all mankind' are concerned, the incident remains an '*impenetrable mystery*', and, in this sense, is

[64] Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, 1907 (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 54 – 55.

committed to the realm of the unknown. Ossipon, on the other hand, can fathom every detail and depth of this mystery, and should, therefore, be able to commit the incident to the realm of the known. However, the endless revolution of this sentence in his own mind effects something of the abyss that both Verloc and Winnie faced, in Ossipon's disturbed consciousness: '[h]e was alone. "*An impenetrable mystery…*" It seemed to him that suspended in the air before him he saw his own brain pulsating to the rhythm of an impenetrable mystery' (p. 248). The fragmentary repetition of this sentence in the text is reminiscent of the pacing of the figure-less passer by, and the ticking of the unseen clock. Ossipon's brain pulsates to the monotonous rhythm that, throughout, is the invisible signifier of the abyss. Associated with this refrain, therefore, is the confusion and convergence of the visible and invisible, the known and the unknown, the reality and the mystery.

The resonant symbolism of the abyss in Conrad's writing is not merely atmospheric in its effect. His belief that art ought be an expression of truth holds significant ramifications for his preference for the obscure. To better understand this relationship – between art, truth, and obscurity – Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* provides a helpful paradigm.[65]

Schopenhauer claims that man needs the metaphysical – however unreal – as a means of obtaining existential relief. He defines metaphysics as 'all the so-called knowledge that goes beyond the possibility of experience, and so beyond nature or the given phenomenal appearance of things, in order to give information about that by which […] this experience or nature is conditioned.'[66] Schopenhauer's metaphysics is synonymous with the traditional association of the term "abstract" with the intangible realm of governing ideas and truths. By

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[65] I am indebted to Mark Wollaeger who first drew my attention to the parallels between Schopenhauer and Conrad in *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*. Wollaeger writes that 'reading the two writers as mutually illuminating locates each within evolving ideas of transcendence that are characteristic of post-Romantic literary and intellectual history' (p. 29). Many of the observations he makes on the connections between Schopenhauer's philosophy and Conrad's artistic impetus demonstrate the need to examine Conrad's idea of truth in relation to his art. I extend Wollaeger's study here by considering Conrad's innovations in representation as directly related to his concept of truth, and its perceived relation to the visible world.

[66] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), II, p. 164.

extension, one can posit the Conradian 'abyss' as an invocation of the metaphysical. Mark Wollaeger identifies this need for the metaphysical in Conrad, writing that, 'Conrad's abrupt transition between abstraction and visual immediacy [...] are symptomatic of his yearning for something beyond the material world' (p. 9). It would be reductive and inaccurate, however, to regard Conrad's urge toward the metaphysical as purely symptomatic of an existential angst (a line taken by many critics). Rather, a more accurate interpretation for this apparent urge can be found in Schopenhauer's theory of art.

For Schopenhauer, as for Conrad, art is akin to philosophy in its ability to relate something of the truth. It is not 'merely philosophy', he states, 'but also the fine arts' that work 'towards the solution of the problem of existence' (p. 406). The purpose of art 'is to reveal to us the Ideas, in other words, to show in an example what life is, what the world is' (p. 425). 'Poetry', he writes, 'is related to philosophy as experience is to empirical science'. Experience acquaints us with the visible world in a particular way, whereas 'science embraces the totality of the phenomenon by means of universal concepts' (p. 427). As with Conrad, therefore, art offers 'a fleeting image' (p. 406), or, as Conrad would say, a 'rescued fragment', or 'glimpse of truth.'[67] Essential to art's conveyance of truth, however, is its ability to provoke imaginative co-operation from the beholder. 'Every work of art', asserts Schopenhauer, 'can act only through the medium of the imagination' (p. 407). To stimulate the imagination, it is crucial that certain things remain unsaid in art: 'something, and indeed the final thing, must always be left over for it to do' (407). This disqualifies, therefore, an art based upon the principle of imitation:

> From the fundamental aesthetic law we are considering, it can also be explained why *wax figures* can never produce an aesthetic effect, and are therefore not real works of fine art, although it is precisely in them that the imitation of nature can reach the highest degree (author's emphasis, p. 408).[68]

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[67] Preface to *The 'Narcissus'*, p. x.

[68] Given the imitative quality of the visual art of Schopenhauer's period, it would be unreasonable to think that he is therefore dismissing most art. For purposes of discussing Conrad, however, it is helpful to apply this statement to the art of Conrad's period in broader terms than we perhaps would in the context of Schopenhauer's.

The 'wax figures' are, to Conrad, the products of the realists, the realisations of those who subscribe too much to the 'dogmas of realism'. They give 'everything, form and colour at the same time; from this arises the appearance of reality, and the imagination is left out of account.' Ambiguity, therefore, is essential for truly conveying something of the visible world. As Schopenhauer succinctly puts it, 'the sketches of great masters are often more effective than their finished paintings' (p. 408).

The dimensionless, intangible abyss persists in Conrad not just as an antagonist of the visible world. The quality of the obscure stimulates the imagination, and thence effects something of the experience of reality in the mind of the beholder. Schopenhauer asserts that:

> We are entirely satisfied by the impression of a work of art only when it leaves behind something that, in spite of all our reflection on it, we cannot bring down to the distinctness of a concept (p. 409).

The obscure aspect of Conrad – the mist, the haze, the darkness, the abyss – cannot be illuminated by 'the distinctness of a concept.' It is not, as Conrad would say, 'in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature.'[69] It realises something of the visible world in its stimulation of an effect, rather than description of a universal concept. In the same letter to Hugh Clifford (in which Conrad states truth as paramount) he also criticises Clifford on the basis that he doesn't 'leave enough to the imagination'.[70] 'Enough' must be consigned to darkness and ambiguity, that something of the truth can be brought to light.

The abyss in Conrad is not a negative manifestation of 'something left behind'. As well as being a stimulus to the imagination, it represents the limitations of human knowledge and perception. Schopenhauer's philosophy

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[69] Ibid., pp. xi – xii.
[70] *Life and Letters*, I, p. 279.

depends upon the maintenance of mystery.[71] Whilst certain fundaments of our existence might be revealed to us (through art, possibly), others necessarily remain obscure:

> Whatever torch we kindle, and whatever space it may illuminate, our horizon will always remain encircled by the depth of night (p. 185).

The language here is virtually Conradian. *The Secret Agent* is fraught with limitations to knowledge, expression, and understanding. Mystery is a vital component of the plot and effect of the text, as is revelation and illumination. Light and dark compete for supremacy, and neither aspect is regarded in isolation of the other. In one instance, the illumination from a pub only serves to intensify the contending aspect of darkness:

> This barrier of blazing lights, opposing the shadows gathered about the humble abode of Mr Verloc's domestic happiness, seemed to drive the obscurity of the street back upon itself, make it more sullen, brooding, and sinister (p. 127).

The simultaneous invocation of light and dark in the novel's aesthetics enacts the tension implicit in Conrad's and Schopenhauer's concept of perception as both illuminating and limiting. Though, for Ossipon and the reader, the mysteries of the plot are solved, still, '[*a*]*n impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever*', complicating the aspect of the known with the residue of the unknown. Just as mystery and revelation converge in this quotation, the text pivots on the meeting point between light and dark, the tangible and the metaphysical, the meaningful and the meaningless.

Conrad's complication of opposites in this later text reiterates his emphasis upon the relative, rather than the universal; upon the effect, rather than the fact.

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[71] Schopenhauer writes, '[f]or the ultimate solution of the riddle of the world would necessarily have to speak merely of things-in-themselves, no longer of phenomena. All our forms of knowledge, however, are intended precisely for phenomena alone; hence we must comprehend everything through coexistence, succession, and relations of causality' (p. 185).

In *A Personal Record*, he states his, and the intellectual community's, rejection of absolutes thus:

> Rules, principles and standards die and vanish every day. Perhaps they are all dead and vanished by this time. These, if ever, are the brave free days of destroyed landmarks, while the ingenious minds are busy inventing the forms of the new beacons which, it is consoling to think, will be set up presently in the old places (p. 96).[72]

Conrad's conflated binaries express a freedom from conventional bounds to knowledge, and a recognition of the limitations to knowledge. *The Secret Agent* supports this view, and makes, more than his earlier texts, a concerted effort to invent new forms that might replace the 'destroyed landmarks' as more veracious expressions of reality. These new forms constitute a significant contribution to the development of the abstract aesthetic more commonly associated with the plastic arts.

XIV

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad charges apparently non-representative images and episodes in the text with the greatest burden of significance. His preference for one-dimensional geometric shapes are examples of this visual abstraction. The narrator describes 'the innocent Stevie', as 'seated very good and quiet at a deal table',

> drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggesting a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable (pp. 45 – 6).

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[72] Schopenhauer similarly, though more forcibly, writes that 'those who profess to know the ultimate, i.e., the first grounds of things, thus a primordial being, an Absolute, or whatever else they choose to call it, together with the process, the reasons, grounds, motives, or anything else, in consequence of which the world results from them, or emanates, or falls, or is produced, set in existence, "discharged" and ushered out, are playing the fool, are vain boasters, if indeed they are not charlatans' (p. 185).

The circle is an abstract shape. It is devoid of a referent in the natural world, and represents nothing beyond itself. Stevie's habitual drawing of circles is supplied with no explanation in the text, consequently, they accrue mystery in place of meaning. It is the absence of apparent meaning that suggests a symbolic quality. Stevie's circles are translated into symbols 'attempting the inconceivable.' Somehow their non-representation implies the expression of the ineffable, of something beyond human comprehension. Given Stevie's underdeveloped mental faculties, one might crudely suggest that these circles are of a primitive quality. The primitive aspect, however, is more appropriate given the (albeit later) connection between the primitive arts and the development of the abstract aesthetic.[73] Conrad's connection of this abstract form to the inconceivable evidences him as a forerunner (and even protagonist) of the discourse associated with the abstract art movement.

Though the abstract in the plastic arts was realised in an abundance of forms and conflicting theories (as were outlined in the first chapter), one idea unites most, namely that the abstract form, as opposed to the natural, penetrated beyond the appearance of things revealing something of the "true reality". Mondrian stated that non-figurative art shows that "'art" is *not the expression of the appearances of reality such as we see it, nor of the life which we live, but that it is the expression of true reality and true life….indefinable but realisable in plastics*."[74] There is a sense of this in Conrad's association of the circles with 'cosmic chaos', and the 'inconceivable'. Purely through the interrelation of their curves and planes, they effect something of the realm beyond perception, a truth behind appearances, 'chaos and eternity' (p. 192). The metaphysical, in this context, is somehow couched in the tangible. This is not dissimilar to Conrad's depiction of the sea in his earlier texts as a metaphysical realm; the significant difference here, however, is in the progression from the abstraction of the visible world to that of total abstract form. Elsewhere in the text, Conrad employs

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[73] Kandinsky wrote of the relation of the modern abstract aesthetic to that of the primitives: '[l]ike ourselves, these artists sought to express in their work only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all considerations of external form', in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 6. This, of course, also recalls Worringer's connection of the abstract form to primitive expression.
[74] (Author's emphasis), 'Plastic', p. 359.

abstract forms synecdochically. In his role as secret agent (under the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim) Verloc was signified in 'official, semi-official, and confidential correspondence', by the symbol '△' (p. 31). The △ is, in this context, both an identifier and a source of mystery. Its significance, however, is not extended in the text beyond this simultaneous dual function. This abstract form – with no perceptible association with the visible world – is used to reveal (and conceal) a truth in the context of mystery. The connection between ostensibly non-representative abstract forms and their ability to express something of the mysterious, ineffable aspect of reality is thus established.

Vladimir's concept of what an anarchic act ought to constitute tallies with Conrad's employment of the abstract mode. Vladimir instructs Verloc that, 'a bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive. It must be that, and only that, beyond the faintest suspicion of any other object' (p. 35). To achieve the full significance of its intended effect, the act itself must appear incomprehensible. Vladimir wishes it were possible to 'throw a bomb into pure mathematics' so as to attack the very foundation of fact and certainty:

> But what is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion, or bribes' (p. 36).

The target and the act are intended to subvert the realm of the comprehensible. The sheer blind destruction ought to be so 'incomprehensible', so 'inexplicable', as to be beyond the realm of human conception. And the 'demonstration must be against learning – science' – because its target is the realm of reason, the perceived absolute aspect of man's existence. The anarchic protest must be thought of as beyond comprehension, because this freedom from fact achieves the greatest effect. It is for this reason, for the communication of an effect rather than a fact, that Conrad develops this abstract aesthetic in literature.

As Jim is an embodiment of the conflated binaries, Stevie, in some ways, is an embodiment of this later abstract form. As the creator of the metaphysically

imbued shapes, it is notable that he is also wholly divorced from the comprehensive world of fact and associated, rather, exclusively with an existence based on feeling. His ability to express himself in language is limited, 'he was no master of phrases', and, the narrative continues, 'perhaps for that very reason his thoughts lacked clearness and precision.' Stevie cannot interpret the visible world in terms of fixed principles or systems of understanding, 'but he felt with greater completeness and some profundity' (p. 142). The following also expresses this preference for feeling over fact:

> Stevie, though apt to forget mere facts, such as his name and address for instance, had a faithful memory of sensations (p. 140).

As Stevie is drawn in to Verloc's scheme, he inexplicably ceases drawing circles. If one were to entertain a symbolic reading of this unexplained occurrence, Stevie's and Verloc's destruction correlates with a move toward fact, and away from feeling. Verloc increasingly feels himself divorced 'from the world of senses', and Stevie is gradually assimilated by Verloc into this sphere of unfeeling, subversive activity (p. 145). The inscription of their address found sewn into Stevie's coat is the one tangible fact and fragment to be found in the ruins of the otherwise incomprehensible act. It is this fact, and Winnie's subsequent discovery of the insufficiency of his feeling, which leads to Verloc's destruction. Aspects of the narrative, therefore, elevate sensation and intuition over reason and fact. This later text's association of the abstract form with the expression of the inconceivable cements Conrad's narrative mode as a pioneer of the abstract aesthetic, and aligns Conrad's artistic endeavour with that of the abstract artists.

XV

For Conrad, the intention of his art was, 'by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel […], to make you *see*.' Whilst Schopenhauer supported this view, stating that every work of art 'endeavours to show us life and things as they are in reality', his assertion that 'art takes away the mist' is at odds

with Conrad's preference for obscurity (p. 407). Rather, Conrad's aesthetic depends upon the 'mist' to communicate something of his vision of reality. The divergence between the philosopher and the artist in this regard, reflects the impact of the intellectual developments of the latter part of the nineteenth century on Conrad, and his aesthetic response to these movements. The obscure and metaphysical dimensions of Conrad's work derive from his belief that truth is something experienced, rather than something stated.

According to Schopenhauer, music – the most abstract of the arts – was the most powerful and expressive form of art. Music, he wrote, 'does not, like all the other arts, exhibit the *Ideas* or grades of the will's objectification, but directly the *will itself*, we can also explain that it acts directly on the will, i.e. the feelings, passions, and emotions of the hearer, so that it quickly raises these or even alters them' (author's emphasis, p. 448). Conrad's mystification of reality, the obscure quality of his writing, and his thwarting of convention renders meaning unfixed, adrift from the usual systems of signification, and subjective. Without these supporting absolutes and 'ideas', the literature acts upon the reader through sensation, exchanging rigid, propositional knowledge for the free play of ideas. Schopenhauer's description of Beethoven is equally appropriate to Conrad's abstract techniques. 'A symphony of Beethoven', he wrote, 'presents us with the greatest confusion which yet has the most perfect order as its foundation; with the most vehement conflict which is transformed the next moment into the most beautiful harmony. It is *rerum concordia discours*, a true and complete picture of the nature of the world, which rolls into the boundless confusion of innumerable forms, and maintains itself by constant destruction.'[75] Conrad's conflated binaries are, in a way, maintained by constant destruction: the destruction of conventionally opposed binaries, which 'roll into the boundless confusion of innumerable forms.' He depicts a world situated at the convergence of chaos and order, freedom and limitation, the metaphysical and the tangible: a world in a state of 'discordant concord'. The 'abstract' quality of music presents itself as 'mere form without material, like a mere spirit world without matter.' For this reason, it

[75] [the discordant concord of the world]

is 'better to interpret it purely and in its immediacy' (p. 450). To approach abstract music in this way is to prize its aesthetic effects, rather than attempting to discern a concealed fact. Perhaps, in Schopenhauer's terms, Conrad succeeded in creating a new mode of representation in language that depended less on ideas, facts, and systems of meaning, and more upon expression, feeling, and indeterminacy.

Of the critic's desire to explain the mystery of the obscure, Beardsley wrote that, 'in pining for what he cannot have, he may miss what is really of supreme worth.'[76] By considering certain aspects of Conrad's writing types of abstraction, and, crucially, preserving them as such, we gain fresh insight into his engagement with and subversion of a traditional dualistic model. The ways in which Conrad appropriates, reimagines, and resituates the abstract aspect of this dualism is demonstrably a crucial device for communicating his relativistic, and somewhat pessimistic vision of reality. As well as revealing and realising something of his own philosophy, however, it demonstrates the faith Conrad put in art's unique ability to go beyond the familiar systems of limitation, effecting a truer sense of reality. Whilst we can comfortably call the shift from the objective to subjective, and from fact to sensation, Impressionist, these shifts might equally qualify aspects of Conrad's writing as abstract. Like the abstract artists in visual culture, Conrad sought a form that would expand the novelist's field of vision, rendering the invisible temporarily visible, and investing physical objects with metaphysical resonances. The forms and methods that inform Conrad's distinctive style – his conflated binaries and geometric shapes – undeniably relate to the various abstract experimentations of visual artists. So, whilst we call Conrad Impressionist, we might also profitably think of him as a pioneer of abstraction.

[76] Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, p. 268.

Chapter Three:
E. M. Forster

I

E. M. Forster's writing bristles with mystery. A review of his second novel, *The Longest Journey*, warned that this book 'is for the adult reader who has learned patience and has no objection to an occasional riddle.' The 'opening chapter seems specially designed to provoke and mystify almost to the point of exasperation."[1] Forster promises bewilderment, if not also frustration. Another contemporary declares it to be 'frankly the most impossible book we have read for many years. [...] We do not propose to discuss the plot, although a synopsis might be of service to the novel-reader who has not the patience to seek a plain meaning in what would seem to be deliberately obscure verbiage."[2] The plot is unclear, meaning is inaccessible, and the language, deliberately obscure.

Mystery provokes the urge to demystify. Questions like 'What happened in the Marabar Caves?' become the crucial preoccupation of those who want to decode the text, to uncover its hidden depths. Forster responded to this question evasively: 'I don't know', he said.[3] The mystery is maintained. Rather than supply the question with an answer, Forster avoids the question altogether. We ought to take this evasion as the directive for reading the mystery in his writing. Rather than seeking to demystify, we ought to, as Forster does, preserve the mystery of his writing. In 'The Raison D'Être of Criticism in the Arts', Forster explained the importance of this, writing that:

> [Art] does not expect to be studied, still less does it present itself as a crossword puzzle, only to be solved after much re-examination. If it does that, if it parades a mystifying element, it is, to that extent, not a work of

[1] Unsigned notice, *Birmingham Daily Post* 24 May 1907, in *E. M. Forster: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Gardner (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 90.
[2] Unsigned notice, *Outlook* 13 July 1907, in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 90.
[3] Letter to William Plomer, 28th September 1934: "When asked what happened there, *I don't know*" [author's emphasis]. Durham, Palace Green Durham University Library, Plomer Collection.

> art, not an immortal Muse but a Sphinx who dies as soon as her riddles are answered.[4]

The mysterious element in Forster's writing is not an invitation to discover an ultimate meaning that will explain, once and for all, the enigma of the text. Explanation kills the sphinx, it 'silences' the text.[5] We shouldn't ask 'what happened in the Marabar Caves?' We ought to look instead at the function and effect of the unexplained, the unexplainable. Like the immortal Muse, the enigmatic is a proliferating source of inspiration, rather than the object of reductive reasoning.

The history of the critical response to E. M. Forster is chequered. Many of the methodologies applied to the study of his literature are contentious, and it is worth examining the motivation behind reading Forster in these particular ways. Broadly speaking, the enigmatic quality of his work seems to have provoked many of these limited and limiting approaches.

Many critics seem duty bound to explain his novels. This creates the criticism as a kind of double-narrative, a translation of the original text. In this vein, earlier criticism, like Rose Macaulay's *The Writings of E. M. Forster*, simply recounts the plot, and any interpretation is limited to issues raised by the narrative events. Macaulay's method is formulaic: first she describes the novel's plot, then the characters, then asks what the 'main preoccupation' of the text is.[6] *A Passage to India* is subject to the following summary: '[i]t is a case of mass misunderstanding, of different-complexioned, different-speaking, different-minded peoples staring at one another myopically across a ravine. Great races with different heritage and history, neither desiring to understand the other, and one of them in the wrong place' (p. 200). Macaulay sought the single unifying concept, and "discovered" it to be that of difference. More recently, the Forster Cambridge

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[4] Forster, 'The Raison D'Être of Criticism in the Arts', in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, pp. 114 – 129 (p. 125).

[5] Writing of *Moby Dick* in *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927 (London: Penguin, 2005), Forster argues that one oughtn't furnish its ambiguities with symbolic meaning: 'it is wrong to turn the Delight or the coffin into symbols, because even if the symbolism is correct it silences the book. Nothing can be stated about *Moby Dick* except that it is a contest. The rest is song' (p. 128).

[6] Rose Macaulay, *The Writings of E. M. Forster* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938), p. 199.

Companion's editor, David Bradshaw, sanctioned this type of approach in his chapter on *Howards End*. The chapter opens with great promise; he begins with the assertion that it is not the novel's 'certainties that catch the eye but its hesitations, tensions, "rich ambiguity … [and] fundamental *irresolution*".'[7] But this invocation of the enigmatic element of the text is abandoned to historicism. With *Howards End* in the one hand, Bradshaw delivers the corresponding historical events with the other. The 'Women Question', eugenics, empire, are all revealed as the 'underlying concerns' of the novel (p. 160). 'Beneath the narrator's soaring words', Bradshaw writes, 'the first readers of *Howards End* would have known that all was not well in rural England' (p. 166). Whilst this approach makes valid and insightful connections between the text and its historical context, it too structures criticism as a 'double-narrative', as a historicist *translation* of the text. By terming his historical co-narrative as the 'underlying concerns', he suggests that he is revealing the covert political, sociological, and ideological "message" of the text. He fills the ambiguous "gaps" of the text with facts.

The postcolonial approaches have handled the mysterious element in Forster obliquely. Frederic Jameson identifies the 'infinity' in *Howards End* as anti-place, which, he concludes, comes to represent imperialism and empire. 'Infinity' in Forster, also bears another name, '*imperialism*.' 'It is Empire which stretches the road out to infinity, beyond the bounds and borders of the national state, Empire which leaves London behind it as a new kind of spatial agglomeration or disease, and whose commercialism now throws up those practical and public beings, like Mr Wilcox, around whose repression of the personal Forster's message will also play."[8] Homi Bhabha also imprints postcolonial concerns upon the baffling, unexplained elements of the text, in this instance upon the 'ouboum' in *Passage*: 'they are the inscriptions of an uncertain colonial silence that mocks the social performance of language with their non-sense; that baffles

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[7] David Bradshaw, 'Howards End', *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 151 – 172 (p. 151). The quotation Bradshaw is using here comes from Peter Widdowson, *E. M. Forster's* Howards End*: Fiction as History* (1977), p. 12.

[8] Frederic Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. by Seamus Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 43 – 66 (p. 57).

the communicable verities of culture with their refusal to translate.'[9] Bhabha argues that the experience of 'cultural difference' in *Passage* occasions the 'extinction of the recognisable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification, at the edge of experience' (p. 206). In other words, the non-sense of some of the text's signifiers – like 'ouboum' – is indicative of a repressed sub-text of the converging and diverging boundaries of cultural difference (akin to Derrida's figuration of 'différance'). Though theoretically sophisticated, Jameson's and Bhabha's methodologies are ultimately not dissimilar from Macaulay's and Bradshaw's. All determine the indeterminate elements of the text in terms of their own 'main preoccupations'. For Bradshaw the mysterious allows him to speak of an implicit sub-current of contemporary social and political concern. For Jameson and Bhabha, the ambiguous, non-sense of the 'grey placelessness' figures a liminal space within which they can insert their postcolonial preoccupations. It would seem, then, that for some critics, the inarticulate features of Forster are an invitation to articulate, they are spaces to be filled. Given that Jameson and Bhabha are concerned with imperialism and colonialism, their colonisation of the spaces produced by the unsaid, unsayable in Forster seems somewhat ironic.

Mystery tends to be the outward manifestation of an aspect hidden from immediate view. Given E. M. Forster's covert homosexuality, the critical reading of the mysterious quality of his writing as symbolic of this (publically) "unspeakable" aspect of self was inevitable. As an analysis of *Maurice* will show, this approach toward understanding Forster's use of mystery can be insightful. The fact of his homosexuality is incontrovertible, and the tension between the sayable and unsayable is, in all his texts, palpable. As Max Saunders argues, 'it may have been precisely this repression of his own sexuality that made him most creative. The novels', he explains, 'might be seen as a form of sublimation: a transformation of what couldn't be expressed more directly.'[10] Furnishing the non-given dimension of a text with the biography of the author, however, requires a

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[9] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Articulating the Archaic: Notes on Colonial Nonsense', *Literary Theory Today*, ed. by Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 203 – 218 (p. 204).

[10] Max Saunders, 'Forster's Life and Life-Writing', *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 8 – 31 (p. 14).

particular lightness of touch. Speaking of Forster's homosexuality in relation to the mysteriousness of his novels has led, in many instances, to a misappropriation of the text's ambiguities. Viewed through this lens, Forster's writing is reduced to a basic structure of binaries: surface and sub-text, said and unspeakable, heterosexual and homosexual. This approach limits, rather than expands, the significance of the text.

Adopting this methodology, David Medalie pronounces *The Longest Journey* as 'a homosexual novel forced to masquerade as a heterosexual one; its strained realism is the result of that.'[11] Taking Forster's homosexuality as his starting point, the significance of the rest of the text – its aesthetics, thematics, devices – is subsumed to this overriding biographical concern. Similarly, Francis King asserted that Forster 'was obliged to find a whole series of metaphors for his real sexual preoccupations'. Again, using Forster's homosexuality as the foundation for his assumptions, King unblinkingly asserts that 'the *true* relationships between Rickie and Stephen Wonham in *The Longest Journey* and between Aziz and Fielding in *A Passage to India* are *of course* homosexual ones' (my emphasis). By extension, Forster is deemed 'incapable of a satisfactory handling of love between the sexes.'[12] All that has a covert, mysterious, or ambiguous quality in the text is appropriated by King as metaphoric of the unsayable undercurrent of Forster's homosexuality, his 'true' concern. Whereas the tangible dimension of the text – the surface – becomes, in relation to this undercurrent, artificial and unconvincing. It is undermined by knowledge of the 'truth' behind appearances. All elements of the text, therefore, are subsumed to the single fact of the author's homosexuality, as though that were the only "key" to unlocking the meaning of his writing.

Virginia Woolf's record of Roger Fry's reaction to *Passage* is telling of another common regard for Forster's mysticism. Whilst he 'greatly admired' Forster's novel, remembers Woolf, he deplored the mystical element: '[o]h lord I wish he weren't a mystic, or that he would keep his mysticism out of his books.'[13]

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[11] David Medalie, *E. M. Forster's Modernism* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), p. 81.
[12] Francis King, *E. M. Forster and his World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), p. 113.
[13] Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, 1940 (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 240.

For some critics, the mystical, mysterious strain of Forster's writing jarred with the Austenian, realist quality. The mysterious was therefore either criticised as incongruous, or it was marginalised (in the words of Denis Godfrey) 'as inconvenient to pursue'.[14] Godfrey's monograph on 'the other kingdom' in Forster is an attempt to combat the critical tendency toward isolating the unseen element in Forster from the seen.[15] Rather than undermine the realism of the text, the spiritual element augments it. 'At no point', he writes, 'is the realism so photographic, so opaque, that we may not with sufficient insight observe the spiritual forces at work within it, endowing it with a higher degree of reality than is to be found in actual life' (p. 7). Unfortunately, however, what initially seemed an important preservation of the mystery is rapidly undermined by Godfrey's own spiritual bent. Whilst Forster seems 'sometimes' to be 'aware of his own spiritual implications', 'occasionally, in the analysis now ahead of us, we shall be identifying spiritual implications of which the author himself may be unconscious' (p. 8). Godfrey approaches the spiritual with a firm view of what the spiritual ought to be. This leads him to conclude that Forster's own concept is fundamentally flawed.[16] Godfrey is rigidly attached to the conventional definition of the spiritual as separate from the visible world, and so the repeated manifestation of the spiritual element 'within the visible world and at the human level' in Forster's writing is deemed 'illogical'. 'This theory', writes Godfrey, 'must now be recognised as inadequate' (p. 216). Thinking of the unseen element purely in terms of a theology imposes a narrow discourse upon this significantly unwieldy, polyvalent aspect.

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[14] Denis Godfrey, *E. M. Forster's Other Kingdom* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), p. 1. Also, in a vein somewhat against his earlier readings (of, for example, *The Longest Journey*) in *Forster's Modernism* (mentioned above), David Medalie later writes against the 'familiar inclination [of critics] to merge the man and his work.' Medalie lists the various 'costs' of this approach, citing 'the importance of his preoccupation with the "unseen"' and 'the Modernist elements in his later fiction.' In 'Bloomsbury and Other Values', *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 32 – 46 (p. 33).

[15] 'The purpose of this study', writes Godfrey, 'is to accord that recognition, to present the evidence within the novels and short stories for that "other world" whose ultimate nature may not be fully communicated but whose presence may certainly be inferred in terms of its effect on human character and activity' (p. 4).

[16] '[W]e have been tacitly and finally required to accept the illogical – a universe that is at one and the same time everything and nothing, meaningful and meaningless. […] On the assumption that the illogical is never acceptable, we must look for its resolution where alone it can be found, in some flaw, some inadequacy in the author's fundamental concept of the unseen' (pp. 205 – 6).

Robert L. Selig identified the tendency to fill the mysterious quality of Forster's writing with explanation from 'outside myths.'[17] Selig confesses himself to be one who once interpreted the ambiguities of *Passage* with an artillery of external ideologies and theories, the type of methodology that would have qualified him for L. C. Knights' and F. R. Leavis' bracket of irrelevant critical approaches.[18] Selig sent the offending thesis to Forster, and received a letter containing the following response:

> You credit me with the reading of much I have never read. I never thought of Aum when I wrote Boum, and I was unaware of the subdivisions of the mystic syllable, I have never read Miss Weston, have only glanced at Frazer, have never been interested in Plato, never thought of his Cave in connection with the Marabar, and throughout your thesis have encountered inferences and comparisons that surprised me [...]. It is your critical method I feel compelled to reject (p. 332).

Forster systematically refutes Selig's method of furnishing the mysterious episodes of the text with externally sourced "correlatives". Not content with only denying the critic his particular comparisons – 'I have never read Miss Weston' – Forster rejected the very method. The remainder of Selig's essay is dedicated to supplying a reading of *Passage* free from the past methodological indiscretions. His "explanation" of the incident in the Marabar Caves as practical joke played by God, however, is no less reductive than the approaches he criticises. He concludes simply, writing that 'the essence of God's distressing joke in the caves is His refusal to manifest Himself' (p. 338). Though avoiding the quest for symbols and

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[17] Robert L. Selig, '"God si Love": On an Unpublished Forster Letter and the Ironic Use of Myth in *A Passage to India*', in *E. M. Forster: Critical Assessments*, ed. by J. H. Stape, 4 vols (Sussex: Helm Information, n. d.) III, pp. 331 – 345 (p. 331).

[18] Ellin Horowitz's essay, 'The Communal Ritual and the Dying God in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*', in *Criticism*, 1, 6 (1964), 70 – 88, is also typical of this approach. Horowitz claims that the 'specific problems' raised by *Passage* 'can be profitably interpreted within the context of myth and ritual' (p. 71). Horowitz writes that 'Forster has drawn upon the cyclic pattern of fertility ritual as an objective correlative for his vision of conflict, political and spiritual, and the life-giving nature of conflict itself' (p. 70). Frederick C. Crews, in *E. M. Forster: The Perils of* Humanism (New Jersey: Princeton; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) asserts a similar methodological requisite for reading *The Longest Journey* writing that its meaning 'depends most crucially upon our interpretation of its myths' (pp. 133 – 4). The notion that one requires an 'objective correlative', such as the knowledge of classical mythology or Hindu fertility rituals, to properly apprehend the text is inherently problematic, and is a methodology that I seek, here, to dispel.

myths, Selig still furnishes the ambiguous with a final meaning, he "solves" the text's central mystery.

What separates the various critics of Forster from one another, is the vast array of terms applied to the mysterious quality of his writing. Some refer to this quality in the vaguest terms possible: Ellin Horowitz, for instance, alludes to it as the 'specific problems' of the text. Others prefer to identify it in terms more specific, and, in doing so, often locate it within an external discourse or body of thought: Godfrey variously refers to it as the 'unseen', or the 'spiritual', which, considered with the title of his monograph – 'the other kingdom' – firmly situates Forster's mystery in a metaphysical discourse, presumably extending from Christian theology. Many opt to speak of the mystery in terms of its ambiguity: Peter Childs refers to it as the 'radical indeterminacy' of the text.[19] Peter Widdowson (and appropriated by Bradshaw) speaks of the 'rich ambiguity' and a reviewer for the *New Republic* calls it 'the elusive and intangible.'[20] Jameson writes of the 'new grey placelessness', and Bhabha calls it 'nonsense.' Some relate the mysterious dimension to a metaphysical beyond, though not necessarily one of theological character: David Ayers designates it 'Infinity', arguing that it structures 'a metaphysical frame which goes beyond.'[21] Elizabeth Langland describes it as 'that something more, that bar of light that cuts across the human and the non-human', and, in addition to speaking of it as 'radical indeterminacy', Peter Childs also refers to it as the 'metaphysical aspects' (p. 192).[22] Others infer allegory and symbolism from the mystery: Virginia Woolf speaks of the 'symbolical' aspect as opposed to the 'real'; whereas John Sayer Martin calls it 'the allegorical element.'[23] There are some, of course, that refer to it as 'mystery', E. K. Brown is one example, and Randall Stevenson, another.[24]

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[19] Peter Childs, '*A Passage to India*', in *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 188 – 208 (p. 188).
[20] R. H., review in *New Republic*, 20 April 1921, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 163.
[21] David Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 214 and p. 219.
[22] Elizabeth Langland, 'Forster and the Novel, in *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 92 – 103 (p. 97).
[23] Virginia Woolf, 'The Novels of E. M. Forster', in *The Death of the Moth*, pp. 104 – 112 (p. 109); John Sayre Martin, *E. M. Forster: The Endless Journey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 115.
[24] E. K. Brown, *Rhythm in the Novel* ([Toronto]: University of Toronto Press, 1950); Randall Stevenson, 'Forster and Modernism', in *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 209 – 222 (p. 216).

With a terminology so broad, then, can one be certain that these critics *are* all referring to what I (for now) identify as the mysterious aspect and quality of Forster's writing? In short, yes. It is the enigmatic nature of this element of Forster's writing that has allowed for such a diversity of terminology, and for so many re-interpretations of what, exactly, the mysterious aspect *is*. Symbolic? A kingdom beyond? Allegory? Mythology? Theology? In a discussion of how we tend to regard the mysterious, René Magritte offers crucial insight. Whilst the spectator (or, reader) might sense the mystery, 'they wish to get rid of it. They are afraid. By asking, "what does this mean?" they express a wish that everything be understandable.' 'But', Magritte contends, 'if one does not reject the mystery, one has quite a different response. One asks other things."[25] We can avoid asking '*what* is the mysterious aspect of the text?' by collectively regarding the various manifestations of mystery as a form of aesthetic abstraction. By equating the mysterious with the abstract, we can accept unknowability as a feature of the text, and instead of asking 'what', 'one asks other things."[26]

II

E. M. Forster claims that literature can speak of life in a way that facts cannot. 'Fiction', he writes, 'is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence."[27] 'Evidence', here, resonates as concrete, whereas the 'something beyond' imbues fiction with a transcendental, metaphysical quality. In 'Anonymity: An Enquiry', Forster differentiates between the two functions that words perform: 'they give information or they create an atmosphere."[28] Pure information 'creates no atmosphere', it is perfunctory and factual (p. 86). At the

[25] René Magritte, quoted in Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 11.
[26] In 'Vital Disconnection in *Howards End*', in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 1, 51 (2005), 43 – 63: Leslie White describes Forster's 'repeated references to to the "unseen" and its synonyms (infinity, the inner life, etc.)' and, by extension, the mysterious, as 'abstract language', thus making the connection, as I do, between concepts of the unseen and abstract aesthetics. It is those aspects of the text that are, as White says, 'resistant to precise definition […] and potentially disorientating to the uninitiated' (p. 50).
[27] *Aspects*, pp. 69 – 70.
[28] Forster, 'Anonymity: An Enquiry', in *Two Cheers*, pp. 85 – 96 (p. 85).

other end of the spectrum lies lyric poetry which, in its pragmatic uselessness, is pure atmosphere. The novel is both information and atmosphere; it is a compromise between the two functions of words. It is the atmosphere of the novel which allows it to speak of that which history, fact, and the purely informative function of words cannot. Atmosphere, writes Forster, 'is the power that words have to raise our emotions or quicken our blood.' But more than that:

> It is also something else, and to define that other thing would be to explain the secret of the universe. This "something else" in words is undefinable. It is their power to create not only atmosphere, but a world, which, while it lasts, seems more real and solid than this daily existence of pickpockets and trams (p. 89).

Forster's concept of the novel depends upon a dualistic discourse. The ineffability of the "something else" associates it with the metaphysical. It is this 'undefinable' atmosphere that renders literature 'more real' than the world as we commonly experience it. Pitted against this metaphysical dimension is the tangible; the 'pickpockets and trams' signify the informative function of words.[29] Information and atmosphere become, in this brief quotation, connotative of the two realms of existence: the visible world and the world beyond appearances, the tangible and the metaphysical.

A couple of years after the publication of 'Anonymity', Virginia Woolf published an essay criticising the 'double vision' of Forster's writing.[30] Adopting a dualistic discourse similar to that used by Forster in his own description of the dual function of words in the novel, Woolf identified a conflict between the metaphysical and concrete aspects of Forster's writing. She wrote,

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[29] In 'Forster's Life and Life-Writing, Max Saunders observes the dualistic quality of Forster's vision and aesthetic, writing that: '[t]here had always been a mystical tendency in his fiction: a pagan alternative to the Christianity he eschewed, which connects the world of Pan and dryads with the world of tea-parties and tourism; the spirit of place and money and society; the unconscious and the conscious. Indeed, it became his signature trick of style to yoke the physical and the metaphysical together in a phrase: telegrams and anger; making the inner life pay; and so on' (p. 16).

[30] 'The Novels of E. M. Forster', p. 112.

> It is the soul that matters; and the soul, as we have seen, is caged in a solid villa of red brick somewhere in the suburbs of London. It seems, then, that if his books are to succeed in their mission his reality must at certain points become irradiated; his bricks must be lit up; we must see the whole building saturated with light. We have at once to believe in the complete reality of the soul (pp. 107 – 8).

Like the pickpockets and trams, the 'solid villa of red brick' represents tangible daily existence. The points of irradiation, however, are what draw us closer toward the ineffable; they provide the atmosphere that 'goes beyond'. Woolf declared that the 'problem' in Forster's writing derives from his attempt to negotiate between these two aspects, between what she called 'the real and the symbolical' (p. 109). Referring to the points of irradiation – when we see the red brick villa lit up, when 'the fire of truth flames through the crusted earth' – Woolf declares that it is in 'these great scenes' that Forster's failure becomes apparent: '[f]or it is here that Mr Forster makes the change from realism to symbolism; here that the object which has been so uncompromisingly solid becomes, or should become, luminously transparent.' The 'real', for Woolf, is apparently located in the uncompromisingly solid objects, the red brick villa. Her description of this feature of Forster's writing is evocative of the exactitude that characterises the realist tradition. She speaks of his 'admirable gift for observation', and tells us that 'he has recorded too much and too literally.' In his depiction of the visible world, Forster has written as a copyist artist would have painted. 'He has given us an almost photographic picture on one side of the page.' Alongside of this ultra-realism, however, 'he asks us to see the same view transformed and radiant with eternal fires.' These familiar, concrete objects are transfigured by Forster into the symbolic; they are suddenly made to speak of some significance beyond themselves. The bookcase that crushes Leonard might as well have carried the 'dead weight of smoke-dried culture'; the Marabar Caves should've appeared to us 'not real caves', but 'the soul of India' (p. 108). But this leap from the real to the symbolical, from the concrete to the metaphysical, undermines the reality of both aspects: 'the conjunction of these two realities seems to cast doubt upon them both.' And it is this polar leap,

this doubt, that is the source of a recurrent 'ambiguity at the heart of Mr Forster's novels' (p. 109).

In 'Anonymity', Forster's use of 'pickpockets and trams' to represent the tangible, concrete aspect is striking for its suggestion of Victorian realist literature. Dickensian London burgeons out of these surprisingly evocative minutiae. The tradition of realism is associated, by Forster, with words that function as information. This correlates with Woolf's location of 'the real' within the solid, concrete aspect of the 'villa of red brick somewhere in the suburbs of London.' By extension, therefore, the 'eternal fires' that transfigure the tangible might be considered in terms of Forster's atmosphere. Here the difference between Woolf's situation of the real and Forster's becomes apparent. Whereas Woolf unhesitatingly attributes the real to these photographically rendered objects of the visible world, for Forster, the words that evoke atmosphere - that 'go beyond' - are 'more real and solid' than the mainstays of Victorian realism.

Critics continue to debate whether Forster's writing qualifies him as a Modernist author.[31] The tension between the two aspects that Woolf identifies is central to this indecision. Whilst the transcendental, ambiguous quality of some of his writing adheres him to Modernist experiments in representation, Forster remains, in many ways, an adherent to traditions of nineteenth-century realism. Just as he envisages the novel as a compromise between words that function as

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[31] *The Cambridge Companion to Forster* evidences the lack of consensus with regards to him as a Modernist writer. Elizabeth Langland in 'Forster and the Novel', hesitates to call Forster a Modernist. Not only does he employ a 'narrative technique more characteristic of high Victorianism than of Modernism', 'his work presents none of the stylistic resistance and technical virtuosity characteristic of his notable contemporaries such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf'. She concludes that Forster, 'at best […] claims a precarious stake in the twentieth-century canon' (p. 92). In the same volume of essays, Jane Goldman conversely states that 'if we are to make sense of women in Forster's fiction, then, we must acknowledge that Forster is a Modernist writer'; in 'Forster and Women', pp. 120 -137 (p. 129). Goldman cites 'the elements of textual self-consciousness, metanarrative, poetic or lyric discourse, and myth' in Forster as evidence of his Modernism. Randall Stevenson, 'Forster and Modernism', declares that Forster was 'scarcely a Modernist' (p. 209), writing that 'even when he did employ tactics Modernism developed, it was often in ways more familiar from the nineteenth century than the twentieth' (p. 220). Whereas in his chapter on '*A Passage to India*', Peter Childs claims that Forster ought to be placed as a 'Modernist writer in his later work' (p. 202). Outside of the Cambridge Companion the likes of Levenson in *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality* admit that Forster 'continues to occupy an ambiguous position in the history of modern fiction' (p. 78). And David Medalie's monograph, *Forster's Modernism*, speaks of 'the reluctant Modernism of E. M. Forster', figuring him, like Levenson does, as an author caught between nineteenth century and Modernist techniques (p. 1).

information, and words that create atmosphere, his negotiation between what Woolf called the 'real and the symbolical', or realist tradition and Modernist experimentation, figures this dualism. Writing of the condition of modernity, Forster regrets that 'the heavens and the earth have become terribly alike since Einstein.' He continues,

> No longer can we find a reassuring contrast to chaos in the night sky and look up with George Meredith to the stars, the army of unalterable law, or listen for the music of the spheres. Order is not there.[32]

Forster mourns the loss of duality, the existence of an order of absolutes as a tonic for the chaos of existence.[33] His declaration that 'information is relative' maintains this association of words that only function as information with the tangible, visible world. Literature, on the other hand, 'is absolute.'[34] Whilst 'order in daily life and in history, order in the social and political category, is unattainable under our present psychology', it *is* attainable in the novel. Art, writes Forster, is 'valuable because it has to do with order.' It 'creates little worlds of its own, possessing internal harmony in the bosom of this disordered planet.' The 'double vision' that prompts Woolf's criticism is Forster's rendering of both aspects of a dualistic existence in the only place he perceives this relationship possible. The marriage of order and chaos that has been lost from his own existence is

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[32] Forster, 'Art for Art's Sake', *Two Cheers*, pp. 96 – 103 (p. 99).

[33] Writing of the prevalence of opposites in Forster's writing, Lionel Trilling observed that the author's 'manner' of presenting these opposites undermines the concept of absolutes: '[a]cross each of his novels runs a barricade: the opposed forces on each side are Good and Evil in the forms of Life and Death, Light and Darkness, Fertility and Sterility, Courage and Respectability, Intelligence and Stupidity – all the great absolutes that are so dull when discussed in themselves. The comic manner, however, will not tolerate absolutes. It stands on the barricade and casts doubts on both sides. […] The plot suggests eternal division, the manner reconciliation; the plot speaks of clear certainties, the manner resolutely insists that nothing can be quite so simple.' In *E. M. Forster*, 1943 (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 12. In 'Bloomsbury and Other Values', David Medalie reiterates Forster's equivocal handling of absolutes, writing that we ought to view his values as 'those of someone for whom a mixture of assertion and bathos, conviction and irony best expressed the "contradictory desires" of modernity' (p. 45).

[34] 'Anonymity', pp. 89 – 90.

fundamental to his vision of art: as a negotiation between information and atmosphere, tangible and metaphysical, visible and invisible.[35]

III

Like Jim of Conrad's eponymous novel, Maurice is narrated at the point of convergence between two antagonistic realms. The tangible realm is presented as that of society, the world of 'pickpockets and trams', 'telegrams and anger'. The metaphysical realm is associated with the individual, the depths of Maurice's consciousness, his "true" self. The subject matter and imagery engineers and maintains a dualism throughout. The narrative pivots on a discourse of light versus dark, reality and fantasy, concrete and abstract.[36] This dualistic discourse communicates the tension at the heart of the novel's concern: the irreconcilability of Maurice's "true" self in relation to the conventions of society. The dualism that had, until the latter half of the nineteenth century, been broadly accepted as defining reality is adopted by Forster in *Maurice* as a model for speaking of the

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[35] Forster's dualism might correspond (in character, at least) to a conventional philosophical or theological dualism, but it is important to isolate his double vision and mysticism from any religious association. He did not subscribe to any theology, describing himself in an interview as a 'non-believer'; in 'Call Me An Unbeliever: Interview With E. M. Forster', *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 23rd September 1968, cited in G. K. Das, *E. M. Forster's India* (n. p.: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 118 – 119. Various critics have observed that, as Frederick Crews puts it, Forster was one who had a 'theological preoccupation without a theology to satisfy it', cited in Judith Scherer Herz, *The Short Narratives of E. M. Forster* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 44. Likewise, Trilling said that 'Forster is not a mystic in any precise sense of the word. Yet there is an element in his work that does give the appearance of mysticism' (p. 44). His persistent mysticism and invocation of the unseen point to a 'theological preoccupation', but these abstractions are, I shall demonstrate, devices and expressions of other aesthetic and philosophical concerns, and ought not be read as religious.

[36] Certain critics have written about the dualism of *Maurice*. In 'Romance and Reality: The Dualistic Style of E. M. Forster's *Maurice*', in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 3, 4 (1974), 163 – 175, Joyce Hotchkiss wrote that 'the novel's main thematic concern is the conflict between two modes of coping with life – the imaginative, poetic, or romantic mode, on the one hand, and the prosaic, realistic or practical mode, on the other' (p. 163). Hotchkiss distinguishes between two styles: 'plain', which is used for 'realistic description' and 'elevated', used 'to suggest a dimension to experience beyond the commonplace' (p. 164). Whilst I agree with this dualistic distinction, and Hotchkiss's identification of these two styles, her article doesn't explore the connection of this stylistic dualism with that of traditional philosophy. Consequently, the discussion is confined to style, and fails to relate the dualistic quality of Forster's aesthetic as a crucial means of realising his particular vision.

unspeakable, for articulating and overcoming the impossibility of homosexuality within the context of Edwardian society.[37]

From the fore, darkness creeps into the imagery of the novel, an unknown threat to the familiar. Although we are initially told that, as a boy, Maurice was 'afraid of the dark', it becomes evident that, actually, it is twilight that perturbs him.[38] It is the intersection between the oppositional states of light and dark that represents the tension of the novel. In his room at night, Maurice is afraid of the half-light he has to endure, first cast by the candle, then the streetlight:

> The trouble was the looking-glass. He did not mind seeing his face in it, nor casting a shadow on the ceiling, but he did mind seeing his shadow on the ceiling reflected in the glass. He would arrange the candle so as to avoid the combination, and then dare himself to put it back and be gripped with fear. He knew what it was, it reminded him of nothing horrible. But he was afraid (p. 23).

It seems that seeing himself reflected as a shadow – as the ambiguous mid-point between light and dark – is what Maurice is afraid of. In this moment of fear, in the shadowy darkness, we are told that Maurice remembers George – the recently

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[37] Critics of *Maurice* have, in the main, been distracted by the homosexual theme of the novel. It has been difficult for many to read it as anything other than, as Christopher Gillie describes it in *A Preface to Forster* (Essex: Longman, 1983), 'a myth to console' Forster (p. 127). Gillie refuses, in fact, to regard its literary or aesthetic achievements at all, declaring that, 'as a contribution to his reputation, *Maurice* was not worth publication.' Its only use, he says, is to help us better understand why, in the other novels, his portrayal of heterosexual relationships is often a failure (p. 128). Gillie is so preoccupied with Forster's handling of the taboo, the other elements of the text pale into insignificance. For others, all aspects of the text are appropriated in their quest to define *Maurice* as a pioneer of queer literature. There have been many, Francis King for one, that have avoided any full discussion of this novel thinking it to be 'the least satisfactory of all Forster's novels' (p. 113). Likewise John Sayre Martin describes this novel as 'the narrowest and least resonant of Forster's six novels' (p. 128), declaring 'its construction' to be 'weak' (p. 136). For these critics, it might be said that their issues with *Maurice* derive from its apparent rejection of Edwardian realism, and its triumphing of (and dependence upon) fantasy. In this vein a review in the *Guardian* (by Julian Mitchell, 'Fairy Tale', 7 October 1971) warned that 'the academics who depend so much on Forster for "value" will have a terrible time [...] justifying an ending which in any other context would be called woman's magazine. The failure to connect fantasy to recognisable life seriously mars the other novels: here it's utterly destructive', in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 439. With a fresh analysis of the role dualism plays in realising the novel's overriding concerns, we can appreciate the aesthetic construct of *Maurice* in a more positive light. As Howard J. Booth recently suggested in '*Maurice*' in *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 173 - 187, *Maurice* ought no longer be thought of as 'unsophisticated' (p. 173) because '[e]ven when it appears otherwise, *Maurice* is not simple and straightforward' (p. 185).

[38] *Maurice*, introd. by P. N. Furbank (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 17. '[T]otal darkness he could bear' (p. 23).

departed garden boy – and whispers his name. This invocation, and his yielding to the sorrow of George's absence, allows Maurice to overcome 'the spectral' (p. 24). Twilight elicits desires that Maurice has yet to articulate. 'He knew what it was', but its lack of tangible, concrete realisation within the visible world is both intriguing and frightening. When Maurice whispers 'George', the inarticulate is drawn toward this single sign. Although the sense of the inexplicable prevails – 'who was George? Nobody' – the sheer fact of having ascribed a concrete reality to the shadowy aspect allows Maurice to overcome its intimidation. Articulation, however vague or inscrutable, is what is sought after.

This incident is the first of many shadowy vignettes that recur throughout the novel. Situations that are half-way between the tangible and the metaphysical, the real and unreal, light and dark, are the points at which Maurice ventures towards a greater sense of clarity. Early on, we are assured by the narrative that:

> Where all is obscure and unrealised the best similitude is a dream. Maurice had two dreams at school; they will interpret him (p. 25).

The dreams are considered representative of Maurice's 'secret life', and, as such, are the hazy articulation of that which cannot otherwise be spoken of.[39] The second dream is the more mysterious of the two, but it proves to be of greater significance in the course of the novel.

> The second dream is more difficult to convey. Nothing happened. He scarcely saw a face, scarcely heard a voice say, "That is your friend", and then it was over, having filled him with beauty and taught him tenderness (p. 26).

The dream is akin to the quality of twilight. It is 'scarcely' tangible, and its apparency is achieved more through effect – of 'beauty' and of 'tenderness' – than it is through any visible, concrete appearance. The narrative continues along these crepuscular lines, explaining that,

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[39] 'Maurice's secret life can be understood now; it was part brutal, part ideal, like his dreams' (p. 26).

> Maurice forbore to define his dream any further. He had dragged it as far into life as it would come. He would never meet that man nor hear that voice again, yet they became more real than anything he knew, and would actually - (p. 26).

The narrative of Maurice's dream is broken by the interruption of a teacher's voice, calling Maurice to attention, '"Hall! Dreaming again!".' Maurice and the reader are abruptly recalled from their metaphysical preoccupation, 'dragged' back into the frame of the visible world. The contrast between Maurice's abstract contemplation and the barked orders of the teacher is a stark reminder of the two realms. Although the dream defies definition and cannot be rendered in life, it is 'more real than anything he knew'. These recurrent dream vignettes – the crepuscular episodes that happen at the border of the imagination and 'life' – are associated with a discourse often used to speak of the abstract, metaphysical realm. That they are closer to the 'real' than the tangible elevates them as something more "true", more fundamental to our understanding.

After the teacher's interruption, the half finished sentence is completed and we are told that the contemplation of that 'scarcely' seen face, and 'scarcely' heard voice, 'would actually pull him back to them in broad daylight and drop a curtain' (p. 26). The divide between the two realms is made more distinct, as one becomes exclusive of the other. By curtaining off the broad daylight of the world of appearances, the dream world is distinguished as dark. The light and dark aspects accrue associations as the narrative progresses. The light is chiefly associated with the visible, tangible realm. It represents society, the indoors, and all the conventions, opinions, and manners prescribed by these limited and limiting structures. This public life is described as a 'game', which, as the novel progresses, Maurice is increasingly reluctant to play (p. 124). The realm of darkness is associated with 'the obscurities of being where no eye pierces', with the metaphysical (p. 58). It represents that which, in the public realm at least, cannot be spoken of. It is associated with the freedom and expanse of the outdoors. This private life is described as 'more real', and, as such, is the truth beyond the games and artifices of the public dimension.

At critical points, Maurice's condition is communicated in terms that figure him in relation to the two conflicting spheres. During his visit to the newly married Clive, a tortured Maurice acknowledges that 'there was now a complete break between his public and private actions.' In the same passage, we are also told that 'as twilight fell, he entered a new circle of torment' (p. 148). Maurice is caught between his public and private facet. Just as twilight figures a liminality between light and dark, Maurice must bear the qualities of both his public façade and private self. The irreconcilable antagonisms are incomprehensibly allied in the figure of Maurice. This is reminiscent of Marlow's description of Jim as appealing to 'all sides at once, - to the side that turned perpetually to the light of day, and to that side of us which, like the other hemisphere of the moon, exists stealthily in perpetual darkness, with only a fearful ashy light falling at times on the edge.' Like the dreams and twilight, Maurice is narrated at a critical point between the apparently irreconcilable spheres, his public and private self, the light and the dark.

After being with Alec for the first time, however, Maurice gradually comes to occupy the private realm to the exclusion of the public. The familiar, visible dimension becomes alien to him, 'each human being seemed new, and terrified him: he spoke to a race whose nature and numbers were unknown, and whose very food tasted poisonous' (p. 175). The language speaks of falling edifices, 'he had disturbed his life to its foundations, and couldn't tell what would crumble' (p. 176). The structures that sustain the public give way in the face of the unfathomability that he has confronted and embraced. The public realm of code and conduct is so anathema to the realm of Maurice's true, homosexual desires that if the one is to be fully realised, the other must disintegrate. Darkness is only realised in the destruction of light. When Clive leaves Maurice's house and Maurice's life 'for ever', this permanent departure is signified by Clive's transition from one realm to another:

> He left the darkness within for that without: […] the mist enveloped him. It was so late that the lamps had been extinguished in the suburban roads, and total night without compromise weighed on him, as on his friend. He too suffered and exclaimed, "What an ending!" but he was promised a dawn (p. 115).

Leaving the 'darkness within' amounts to saying that Clive lets go of any homosexual desire. Although he exits into 'total night', he, unlike Maurice, is 'promised a dawn.' As Clive sets out to lead a life of absolute convention, we are told that the 'love of a woman would rise as certainly as the sun, scorching up immaturity and ushering the full human day.' His homosexual impulse is euphemistically reduced to a dark period of immaturity; it is irradiated out by the light associated with the public life that Clive chooses.

Forster narrates the developments and tensions of the novel in this dualistic discourse – light and dark, public and private, tangible and intangible – as a means of structuring a reality where the illicit, unspeakable love between two men is realisable. The dream of the desired friend becomes a reality through a complicated process of merging and exchanging the characteristics of the separate spheres. The scarcely perceptible dream - where the desire for the friend finds its first articulation – is firmly situated in the metaphysical, intangible realm. Though it feels 'more real' than anything else Maurice has ever known, it is confined to representing Maurice's 'secret life', and is screened off from the 'broad daylight' of the public, tangible sphere. The coming together of Clive and Maurice is facilitated by a dream. An 'image' of Maurice visits Clive in his sleep, and, 'in the first glimmer of dawn', causes Clive to call 'Maurice-' 'out of dreams' (p. 71, p. 62, and p. 63). 'His friend had called him', and Maurice answered, whispering Clive's name as he climbs the mullion to meet him:

> They kissed, scarcely wishing it. Then Maurice vanished as he had come, through the window (p. 71).

Here, the metaphysical and the tangible converge. Clive's dream re-enacts the scene where Maurice whispers for 'George' in the half-light of his bedroom. That 'they kissed, scarcely wishing it' immediately recalls Maurice's 'scarcely' perceptible dream. In this instance, however, the metaphysical and the tangible collide. The dream allows the desires of the metaphysical realm to be realised in the tangible.

There is a sense that in the twilight, these two spheres have, to an extent, found a situation where they can co-exist.

It is significant, however, that this dream is realised in the context of 'the first glimmer of dawn', in twilight. It is twilight that Maurice cannot endure, and, as the disintegration of their relationship evidences, the convergence and compromise between the two spheres is unsustainable. Clive chooses the side of the light, and Maurice is left in a crepuscular limbo, caught between 'his public and private actions'. This relationship was never consummated, which is symptomatic of a crucial connection not made, a prevailing irreconcilability of two beings, two spheres. But Maurice's relationship with Alec is different. It is in the development of this relationship that the character of the spheres is settled, the muddle between them is resolved, and Forster's reason for narrating in these dualistic terms is realised.

Alec and Maurice connect in the realm of total darkness. Outside at Penge, the two men enjoy an innocuous exchange, and we are told that 'they harmonised in the darkness'. Inside, however, Maurice encounters Clive's wife, and the outward social form is resumed, 'her face clicked into position as he entered, so did his own.' The contrast between the artifice of the public sphere and his natural desires is at its most heightened here. Following these two polar exchanges, Maurice looks out of his window into the darkness, saying, '[a]h for darkness – not the darkness of a house which coops up a man among furniture, but the darkness where he can be free!' (p. 166). He craves 'big spaces where passion clasped peace, spaces no science could reach, but they existed forever, full of woods some of them, and arched with majestic sky and a friend…' (p. 166). Maurice's desire for a friend is articulated in terms of the outside, of the beyond. In yet another revisualisation of the dream, Maurice wakes himself up 'when he sprang up and flung wide the curtains with a cry of "Come!"' (p. 167). Opening the curtains is like opening the portal to the other sphere. Alec emerges from this outer, dark realm in a scene that is distinctly recollective of both the time that Maurice came to Clive, as well as the scarcely perceptible dream. Just as Maurice came (and vanished) through the window when he answered Clive's call, so does

Alec in response to Maurice's subconscious summoning. Alec also echoes Maurice from the previous scene, telling Maurice (as he had Clive), 'I know'. Rather than name the figure emerging through the window, the narrative refers to him as someone Maurice 'scarcely knew', connecting him to the scarcely seen or heard figure from Maurice's dream.

The reverberation of the earlier scenes in this one invites direct comparison between the dream of the friend and the realisation of that friend. Maurice asks Alec whether he has ever dreamt he'd a friend, '[s]omeone to last your whole life and you his. I suppose such a thing can't really happen outside sleep', he concludes (pp. 172 – 3). But for Forster, 'a happy ending was imperative.' Though his own society – at the time of writing – would not legally or socially allow for such a union, he was 'determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows.'[40] The initial presentation of Maurice's desire for a friend as a dream pits it against the world of appearances, conveying it – as Maurice suspects – as something unrealisable in "reality". The recurrent interweaving of the dream in the context of Maurice's actual experience, however, eventually realises it as the very essence of reality. Forster uses the dualistic model to achieve his 'happy ending'. In the terminal note, he writes that Alec 'must loom out of nothing until he is everything' (p. 220). This is precisely what the navigation between the two realms achieves. In a final act of exchange, the dream is realised as essentially real, and the world of appearances, as artifice.[41] What first seemed equatable to 'nothing' in the terms of the apparent world, becomes, in the last passages of the novel, 'everything'.

Maurice's union with his 'longed-for friend' is only realisable through the totality of darkness. The imagery of the final pages of the novel abandons the twilight that characterises the earlier narrative, speaking only in terms of the irreconcilability of light and dark. Darkness becomes the only realm in which Maurice can find sense and order. Muddled by his situation with Alec, the two

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[40] Forster's Terminal Note, *Maurice*, p. 218.

[41] In *E. M. Forster: A New Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), Wendy Moffat writes that Forster wished to show in *Maurice* that 'the actual world, the place where a man like Henry Wilcox might feel most at home, was a little different than custom would have us believe' (p. 114).

'strode raging through the last glimmering of the sordid day; night, ever one on her quality, came finally, and Maurice recovered his self-control and could look at the new material that passion had gained for him' (p. 197). Paradoxically, darkness gives Maurice clarity of vision, and, as 'ever one', it promises unity. For Forster's happy ending to be realised, Maurice knows that:

> They must live outside class, without relations or money; they must work and stick to each other till death. But England belonged to them. That, besides companionship, was their reward. Her air and sky were theirs, not the timorous millions' who own stuffy little boxes, but never their own souls (pp. 208 – 9).

Maurice and Alec must live in the other realm, 'outside' of the confines and conventions of the public sphere. But their exile is not narrated in negative terms. All the qualities that have gathered in association with the dark aspect throughout the story converge in the imagery of the final pages, celebrating the darkness as essential and the light as contingent. Earlier on, Maurice tells us that 'if the will can overleap class, civilisation as we have made it will go to pieces' (p. 181). This, it seems, is the case here. A limitlessness is ascribed to the realm Maurice and Alec disappear into. The indefinability of the darkness, the expanses of the air and the sky, endless companionship, and the freedom outside of convention, all maintain the metaphysical quality of the dream, despite having now been realised.

In the final scene, Maurice becomes the essence of darkness itself. He comes to Clive when 'the hour was extremely late, and the night dark' (p. 211). He remains outside, invisible, just a voice speaking from the unfathomable black of night as though the embodiment of the scarcely seen or heard voice from his dream. Clive detects Maurice as a 'core of blackness in the surrounding gloom', and 'felt that his friend' had become 'essential night' (p. 211 and p. 212). Next to Maurice's absolute, essential quality, Clive's preoccupation with civilisation, codes of conduct, and 'Cambridge men…pillars of society' seems arbitrary (p. 213). As Maurice disappears into darkness forever, Clive's last words to him – '[d]inner-jacket's enough, as you know' - seems suitably emblematic of the class and code that Maurice chooses to live outside of. Whilst Maurice's acceptance of the realm

of darkness leaves him with the feeling that the 'universe had been put in its place', as Clive turns back into his house and the light, it is with the thought that he must 'correct his proofs', and 'devise some method of concealing the truth from Anne' (p. 209 and p. 215). By situating Maurice's illicit, unspeakable desire in the metaphysical, unfathomable realm, Forster realises it as a truth underlying artifice, and a reality "more real" than concrete edifice. The dualism of *Maurice* not only articulates the irreconcilability of Edwardian society and homosexuality, it provides a discourse that exposes the contingency of social convention, and sanctifies the love between two men as essential.

By reading the dualisms of *Maurice* in terms of the novel's homosexual concerns, do I then commit the same methodological mistakes as those critics who hunt for hidden truth within the text's ambiguities? Crucially, no. In the case of *Maurice*, the homosexual dimension is not covert, it isn't secreted within the text's ambiguities, waiting to be discovered by some elaborate critical decoding. It is the central, apparent concern of the novel. To read the text's dualisms, particularly its metaphysical, dark, unknown dimension within the frame of the novel's central concern is not to furnish it with a final signified. Rather than decoding the abstractions of the novel, we look instead at their function and effect; how they serve the novel's overriding concern. Read this way, Forster can be seen to appropriate and reimagine a traditional dualism to achieve his seemingly impossible 'happy ending'. The abstractions of his writing realise his crucial vision.

In 'A Book that Influenced Me', Forster wrote that 'I like that idea of fantasy, of muddling up the actual and the impossible until the reader isn't sure which is which, and I have sometimes tried to do this when writing myself.'[42] The two realms of *Maurice* are a double vision of the actual and the impossible, of realism and fantasy. As the conclusion of the novel demonstrates, however, the actual aspect is insufficient for truly speaking of reality. The actual becomes equatable with Forster's view of history and facts as insufficient for speaking of the essence of life. The fantastical, metaphysical aspect, however, is demonstrative of the capability of literature for 'true' representation. Unfettered by the constraints

[42] Forster, 'A Book that Influenced Me', in *Two Cheers*, pp. 222 – 226 (p. 226).

of convention, it 'goes beyond' and, in doing so, realises the very thing which, in the actual realm, was considered impossible. As Wendy Moffat articulates, '[w]hat was art for, if not to show a new way forward?' (p. 114). Forster's yoking together of the actual and the fantastical, the tangible and the metaphysical, demonstrates that, in art at least, the impossible is attainable.

IV

Howards End is also a novel composed of binaries.[43] The story pivots on the conflict and negotiation between opposing realms and ideologies. Familiar tensions – between the public life and the private; social convention and personal relations; fact and imagination, the unseen and the tangible – are explored here, alongside other dyadic oppositions, between England and the continent, the pastoral and the urban, the halcyon day and modern progress. Broadly speaking, the Wilcoxes and Schlegels represent the warring realms. The interactions, connections, and divergences in the novel, however, evidently complicate this basic dichotomy. Paramount to both the thematics and the aesthetics of the novel is the navigation between these separate realms, the connection and communication between disparate elements of the narrative. The double vision effected by Forster's subscription to both a realist and an abstract aesthetic is, here, implicitly debated in the dualistic conflicts of the novel.[44] 'Only connect!' declares Margaret.

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[43] The prevalence of opposites in *Howards End* has rarely gone unnoticed in the critical response. As David Bradshaw, in '*Howards End*', observed, 'questions of "contrast" dominate *Howards End*, the criticism it has generated and the challenges it presents. […] The cleavage between the *Weltanschauung* of the Schlegels and the Wilcoxian worldview is something about which every critic of the novel has something to say' (p. 153). John Sayre Martin, for instance, asserts that this 'novel's world is composed of contraries – of antithetical places and people, embodying antithetical values' (p. 110). For Martin (and various others), however, the dualistic framework is to the detriment of certain aspects of this novel. Of the Wilcoxes, for instance, Martin argues that it is their antithetical conception that renders them 'types rather than individuals, and types, it must be said, that would tax the credulity of a child and the sympathy of a saint' (p. 114). These reductive criticisms of Forster's dualist frame suggest a need to re-evaluate the prevalence and importance of a 'double vision' in his writing.

[44] 'Realist', here, is a reference to the realism typical of nineteenth century literature; a representation based upon "copying" reality. Lilian R. Furst, *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) argues that, 'by underscoring the affinities between the fiction and everyday life, [realists] were implicitly subscribing to referentiality as the appropriate mode of reading' (p. 13). 'The perception of realism

'Live in fragments no longer.'[45] The real is affixed to neither realm, rather, it depends upon an oscillation between the two. Just as the connections between disparate realms are championed as the central matter of this novel, the constant navigation between the realist and the abstract, the tangible and the unseen, is demonstrated to be the ideal aesthetic for realising this vision.[46]

In general terms, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes figure the oppositional realms crucial to the double vision of the novel. The Schlegels celebrate personal relations as the fundament of existence, whereas the Wilcoxes are more concerned with subscribing to the codes of conduct that structure one's public life. Margaret describes these two realms, explaining to Helen that,

> The truth is that there is a great outer life that you and I have never touched – a life in which telegrams and anger count. Personal relations, that we think supreme, are not supreme there. There love means marriage settlements; death, death duties. [...] This outer life, though obviously horrid, often seems the real one – there's grit in it. It does breed character. Do personal relations lead to sloppiness in the end? (p. 41).

The telegrams and anger that characterise the outer life are reminiscent of the pickpockets and trams that Forster uses to signify the realist tradition. The world of the Wilcoxes is firmly presented in these realist terms, whereas that of the Schlegels is marked by allusion to a metaphysical, ineffable quality. For the Wilcoxes, 'love means marriage settlements; death, death duties.' That which, for many, is of an indefinable quality, is rendered tangible by the likes of the Wilcoxes by contract and quantification. Their realm is concrete. It is signified by trains,

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as essentially referential', writes Furst, 'persisted with astonishing tenacity' (p. 15). Realists of this period then placed great faith in the 'referential force of the word.' This, argues Furst, explains their 'recourse to "solidity of specification" as the way to attain an "air of reality"' (p. 8). There are aspects of Forster's aesthetic that adhere to the "solidity" associated with realist renderings; the telegrams, trams, and pickpockets are fairly representative of this. The "abstract" aspects of his writing that I refer to here are those that pull away from an absolute, fixed sense of referentiality toward ambiguity, mystery, and a less referential, more atmospheric form of communication.

[45] Forster, *Howards End*, 1910, ed. by Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 188.

[46] R. A. Scott-James, a contemporary reviewer of the novel, identified this now immortal phrase as 'Mr F's motto'. Recognising the inextricable relationship between Forster's philosophy and his aesthetic, Scott-James argued that '[i]t is because he has taken this motto not only for his book but also for his method of work that he has achieved the most significant novel of the year.' In 'The year's best novel', *Daily News*, 7 November 1910, in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 135.

boats, trams, fortresses, and various other bastions of commerce, civilisation, and empire. Speaking in defence of this realm, Margaret tells Helen that Henry possesses 'all those public qualities which you so despise and enable all this.' She continues: '[i]f Wilcoxes hadn't worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn't sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No – perhaps not even that. Without their spirit life might never have moved out of protoplasm' (p. 177). All that furnishes life with order and outward form is attributed by Margaret (and the narrative) to the Wilcox type. It is as though the tangible dimension depends upon them. Specificities of detail – the trams, the telegrams – effect a sort of Dickensian realism, whilst the intertwining ideologies attributed to the outer life – the codes of conduct, civilisation, commerce – weave the structures of a social fabric akin to George Eliot's brand of realism. Margaret's suspicion that this outer life is 'the real one' cements the association of the Wilcox aesthetic with that of the realist tradition, as concrete, structured, and precise.

By contrast, the Schlegels and their values are described in terms that defy concrete definition. They are often discussed in a language that is evocative of an abstract quality. Their Germanic heritage, for instance, helps separate them from the typically "English" qualities that characterise the Wilcoxes. 'The Continent', it is explained, 'is interested in ideas. Its literature and art have what one might call the kink of the unseen about them.' The narrator continues: '[t]here is more liberty of action in England, but for liberty of thought go to bureaucratic Prussia. People will there discuss with humility vital questions that we here think ourselves too good to touch with tongs' (p. 87). Essentially the English are pragmatists, and the Prussians dwell upon abstractions. The Schlegels are preoccupied with 'infinity' and the 'unseen'. These metaphysical concerns are inextricably bound to personal relationships and the private dimension. The public dimension and its limiting structures thwart one's access to the illimitable beyond. Despairing of the commercialism of Christmas, felt by Margaret to be 'the grotesque impact of the unseen on the seen', she reflects:

> But in public who shall express the unseen adequately? It is private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision (p. 90 and p. 91).

Whilst the public, material aspect is concrete and defined, personal relationships and the private life are characterised by indefinitude.[47] In getting 'beyond' the daily vision, however, the very intangibility of the latter aspect comes closer to an abstract expression of the real. It would seem, then, that both aspects claim to be the situation of the 'real', of truth.

The repeated association of Leonard Bast with 'gray' is reminiscent of Maurice's association with twilight; a figure caught between realms. Just as Conrad uses the 'crepuscular' to speak of the indeterminate space between the two realms of light and dark, the tangible and the metaphysical, 'gray' articulates Leonard's liminal situation between the ordered, public dimension, and the less defined, private dimension. 'His was a gray life', we are told, 'and to brighten it he had ruled off a few corners for Romance' (p. 129). That 'Romance', with a notable capital 'R', is of an ineffable, sublime quality, that which the likes of Burke discussed in terms of illimitability and metaphysicality.[48] Bast regards the Schlegel sisters as the embodiment of this quality – 'they were Romance' – but he is wary of submitting entirely to this abstract dimension, tethered ultimately to the systems and ordering of the public sphere.[49]

Leonard's description of his blind foray into the pitch black countryside is, by its very unfathomability, interpreted by the Schlegels as an attempt to get at something beyond. 'You've pushed back the boundaries', Helen cries, whilst

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[47] Elsewhere, Margaret comes to the conclusion that 'any human being lies nearer to the unseen that any organisation, and from this she never varied' (p. 44).

[48] For Edmund Burke, a certain obscurity and sense of infinitude was crucial for effecting ideas of beauty and the sublime. These might be seen to correspond to the presentation of Romance and the Schlegels here. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757, ed. and introd. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), Burke describes '[t]he ideas of eternity and infinity' as 'among the most affecting we have' (p. 61). [H]ardly anything, he continues, 'can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds' (p. 63).

[49] 'But he would not let Romance interfere with his life. There is the devil to pay then' (pp. 143 – 144).

Margaret understands it as an attempt to 'get away from the fogs that are stifling us all – away past books and houses to the truth. You were looking for a real home' (p. 128 and p. 148). By abandoning himself to the dark unknown, Leonard leaves the limiting structures associated with the daily life. 'What's the good', he rhetoricises, 'of living in a room forever? There one goes on day after day, same old game, same up and down to town, until you forget there is any other game. You ought to see once in a way what's going on outside, if it's only nothing particular after all' (p. 127).[50] Subscribing to the discourse that distinguishes the two realms – games and rooms versus the outdoors – Leonard describes his urge to leave the confines of the one, for the expanse of the other. The 'fogs that are stifling us all' figure something of the indistinct and muddled character of 'gray', of a life suspended between clarity and obscurity. The darkness, for the Schlegels, is essential, its abstract quality rendering it more 'real' than the synthetic materialism (houses and books) of the visible world.

To the Schlegels' disappointment, however, Leonard concludes that this adventure into the unknown must have been prompted by 'reading something of Richard Jefferies'. 'You're wrong there', counters Helen, '[i]t came from something far greater' (p. 127). In the opening pages of Jefferies' autobiography, *The Story of My Heart*, he writes of the recurrent urge of his 'heart' for a 'strong inspiration of soul-thought.' 'It is injurious to the mind', he writes, 'to be always in one place and always surrounded by the same circumstances.'[51] Under these circumstances, Jefferies walks out to a hill in the countryside, in an attempt to free something of himself from the constraints of daily monotony. By the time he reaches the summit of the hill, he has 'forgotten the petty circumstances and annoyances of existence. I felt myself, myself' (p. 3). In his solitary commune with the natural surround, he prays that he might 'touch to the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity' (p. 6). It is not untoward, then, that Leonard should think his pastoral, existential foray inspired by Jefferies. Jefferies' writing strains

[50] When Helen asks whether the light of dawn was 'wonderful', it is significant that Leonard replies, simply, 'no'. It is the darkness which was beguiling, and not the grey aspect from which he was escaping (p. 126).
[51] Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart: My Autobiography*, 1883 (London: Longmans, Green, 1922), p. 1.

toward something beyond expression and familiar experience, toward the unseen. But despite the mystical bent of his writing, Helen rejects Leonard's deference to this author.

It is not so much Leonard's selection of Jefferies that is at fault. It's that he trusts more to the articulated experience of another than he does his own ineffable experience. He marginalises and materialises his foray into the unknown, in his urge to explain his intangible experience. The 'swamp of books' are not to blame for leading Leonard back toward the material, it is Leonard's failure to recognise them as a means rather than the end:

> The fault is ours, not theirs. They mean us to use them for signposts, and are not to blame if, in our weakness, we mistake the signpost for the destination (p. 127).

Literature draws one closer toward the metaphysical beyond, it is not, however, the articulation of that other sphere. Just as writing is not a 'crossword puzzle', or a mystery to be solved, books ought not be regarded as furnishing one with the type of ultimate meaning associated with the abstract, metaphysical realm. The very character of the unknown is its ineffable quality; to speak of it, would be to destroy it. Leonard's misappropriation of books as the destination rather than the signpost is akin to the critical assumption that mystery in Forster can be furnished with a final signified. In his fleeting but total abandonment of himself to the darkness, Leonard's 'mind dwelt on something that was greater than Jefferies's books', namely 'the spirit that led Jefferies to write them' (p. 127). 'He had hitherto supposed the unknown to be books, literature, clever conversation, culture. […] But in that quick interchange a new light dawned. Was that "something" walking in the dark among the suburban hills?'. In the obscurity of darkness, what is known is obliterated, and Leonard communes with that ineffable 'something beyond life's daily gray', the 'spirit' that cannot be spoken of, but only experienced (p. 131).

At the moment of his death, Leonard Bast is struck with the flat of a sword and showered with falling books. The symbolism is forcefully apparent. A

life spent caught between realms – in the gray – is, it would seem, unsustainable. Charles' striking of Leonard with the sword seems somehow emblematic of Leonard's inability to succeed in the professional, public sphere. Charles is the embodiment of that sphere, and the sword, symbolic of the structures of order, civilisation, and masculinity. Leonard's attempt to apprehend the unknown dimension through literature is also a failure, as his eventual swamping by books all too literally conveys. As the Schlegels observe, his tendency to mingle 'true imagination with false' prevents him from going beyond the bounds of structure to the unseen; 'one little twist, they felt, and the instrument might be in tune. One little strain, and it might be silent forever' (p. 128). Leonard's vain attempt to reconcile the tangible and the metaphysical – particularly in his belief that the former can be used to speak of the latter – proves untenable and, ultimately for him, destructive.

V

The novel presents a more complicated vision than the basic dualism suggested by the opposing characteristics of the two families. "Truth" and the "Real" is situated in neither realm, nor, as Leonard evidences, is it to be found in the gray convergence of the two. At the heart of this novel is the attempt to find a place for truth, and to engineer a compromise between the apparently irreconcilable aspects. Forster's handling of places reflects this effort. Places, like the characters, are also figured in a language normally used to speak of a dualistic vision of existence. In these contexts, however, the characteristics – both tangible and metaphysical – are muddled, and it is often unclear which dimension of a traditional dualism a place might conceptually belong to.

London is characterised by a metaphysical quality, but unlike the abstract realm of the unseen, it is void of any fundamental, universal truth. It 'lies beyond everything', 'one visualises it as a tract of quivering gray, intelligent without purpose, and excitable without love' (p. 116). Rather like Leonard's mingling of

true imagination with false, London is described in terms of muddled realms, a 'gray', middling aspect. It is inexplicable, ungraspable:

> We reach in desperation beyond the fog, beyond the very stars, the voids of the universe are ransacked to justify the monster, and stamped with a human face. London is religion's opportunity – not the decorous religion of theologians, but anthropomorphic, crude. Yes, the continuous flow would be tolerable if a man of our own sort, not anyone pompous or tearful – were caring for us up in the sky (p. 116).

We reach toward the unseen – 'the voids of the universe' – in the hope of supplying London (our earthly surround) with some significance. Its flux and chaos leaves one desperate for something concrete, something meaningful. Margaret professes to 'hate this continual flux of London. It is an epitome of us at our worst – eternal formlessness; all the qualities good, bad and indifferent, streaming away – streaming, streaming for ever' (p. 184). The 'eternal formlessness' conjures London as unfathomable chaos; it lacks tangibility, and has no systems or structures of meaning. Even the concrete quality of the city – its edifices - are described as 'the architecture of hurry', and the hurried language, as 'clipped words, formless sentences' (p. 116). Helen becomes associated with this gray, formless realm as she is described as having 'passed into chaos' (p. 274). Thinking that Helen's sanity might be compromised, '[t]he mask fell off the city, and [Margaret] saw it for what it really is – a caricature of infinity' (pp. 274 – 5). The 'familiar barriers', the tangible aspect - the houses and streets - through which Margaret had walked for years, 'became negligible suddenly.' Instead, Helen is perceived by Margaret as having been absorbed into the 'grimy trees and the traffic and the slowly flowering slabs of mud. She had accomplished a hideous act of renunciation and returned to the One' (p. 275).

A complete surrender to the formlessness of London is, to Margaret, dreadful. Seeking respite in something concrete, she looks to the stalwart edifice of St Paul's but finds that, within, 'St Paul's is as its surroundings – echoes and whispers, inaudible songs, invisible mosaics, wet footmarks crossing and recrossing the floor. […] There was no hope of Helen here' (p. 275). The description of

these passages strays between the realms in a confused and confusing manner. Words like 'chaos', 'infinity', 'the One', 'negligible', 'continual flux, and 'eternal formlessness' all associate London with a metaphysical beyond. London is just a 'caricature of infinity', however, and though it pushes one to seek significance in the 'voids of the universe', it defies any association with fundamental meaning or truth. Margaret looks to Henry as 'the only hope. Henry was definite' (p. 275). All the metaphysical, formless attributes of London are too far detached from definition for it to ever be the situation of truth. The welter, in Margaret's mind, requires at least some order and definition, some concrete quality, to rescue it from nonsense, to save Helen from oblivion.

It is Margaret who articulates what 'truth' is in *Howards End*. She feels that 'there was something a little unbalanced in the mind that so readily shreds the visible', which explains her later assimilation of the potentially insane Helen with the 'eternal formlessness' of London (p. 195). Whilst Helen declares the unseen aspect as the site of truth and reality, Margaret maintains that both spheres – the tangible and metaphysical, the world of telegrams and that of personal relations – together forge the essential.[52] For Margaret, 'the businessman who assumes that this life is everything, and the mystic who asserts that it is nothing, fail, on this side and on that, to hit the truth' (p. 195). Aunt Juley's supposition that it might then lie 'about halfway between' is dismissed. This, after all, would have located truth in the 'gray' realm which, as Leonard's attempt to compromise between the two aspects demonstrated, is mutually destructive. 'No', contends Margaret,

> Truth, being alive, was not halfway between anything. It was only to be found by continuous excursions into either realm, and, though proportion is the final secret, to espouse it at the outset is to ensure sterility (p. 196).

Truth is not of static, factual, or absolute quality, nor is it entirely metaphysical, located in the unseen, formless realm. Rather, it is the relationship between the

[52] Describing her vision of truth and reality to Margaret, Helen says that '[y]ou and I have built up something real, because it is purely spiritual. There's no veil of mystery over us. Unreality and mystery begin as soon as one touches the body. The popular view is, as usual, exactly the wrong one' (p. 195).

separate spheres and 'continuous excursions' between them, that composes truth. This kinetic compromise characterises the 'double vision' of Forster's writing.

In a letter to Helen earlier in the story, Margaret instructs her not to 'brood too much [...] on the superiority of the unseen to the seen.' She admits that it is 'true' that the unseen is superior, however, 'our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them' (p. 112). Margaret's, and by extension, Forster's vision is founded upon connection between the visible and invisible, concrete and metaphysical. London's eternal formlessness, though evocative of the 'superior' unseen aspect, bewilders Margaret. Mrs Wilcox and Howards End are also described in a metaphysically inspired terminology; unlike London, however, they facilitate the connection between the opposite aspects and prove fundamental to realisation of the novel's vision of reconciliation.

Mrs Wilcox draws the unseen into the frame of the seen. With each word she speaks, 'the outline of known things' grows 'dim' (p. 88). She inspires the familiar with a sense of beyond. As a guest at Margaret's lunch party, she appears to be unintellectual, yet gives the impression of 'greatness'. Though Margaret and her other guests engage with grandiose abstract discussions of Thought and Art, it is Mrs Wilcox who projects 'a personality that transcended their own and dwarfed their activities.' Margaret's intellectual preoccupations are trivialised by Mrs Wilcox's ineffable, transcendental quality. 'She and daily life were out of focus: one or the other must show blurred. And at lunch she seemed more out of focus than usual, and nearer the line that divides daily life from a life that may be of greater importance' (pp. 86 – 87). Mrs Wilcox bridges the tangible and intangible. As a figure closer to the unseen, she is the embodiment of Margaret's vision of a reconciliation between the visible and the invisible, the daily life and a life of greater importance.

Speaking to Mrs Wilcox of life's contradictions, Margaret expresses the need for proportion: 'to live by proportion, don't *begin* with proportion.' Mrs Wilcox agrees, saying 'indeed, you have put the difficulties of life splendidly' (p. 83). The description of Mrs Wilcox's death realises this balanced ideal. 'How easily she slipped out of life!' observes the narrator (p. 102). Being narrated at a

point between the tangible and unseen aspect, Mrs Wilcox seems ever on the verge of the invisible. In her passage toward death, she is described in intermediary terms: 'Mrs Wilcox had taken the middle course […]. She had kept proportion.' 'If there is any rule' for death, the narrator instructs, it is thus that we ought to die, 'neither as victim nor as fanatic, but as the seafarer who can greet with an equal eye the deep that he is entering, the shore he must leave.' Mrs Wilcox's death brings Margaret a greater understanding, 'she saw a little more clearly than hitherto what a human being is, and to what he may aspire. Truer relationships gleamed' (p. 111). Mrs Wilcox – in life and in death – achieved something of the proportion that Margaret envisages as they key to negotiating between the oppositional realms. It is this proportion which enables 'truer relationships', helping to realise the essence of Margaret's creed, too:

> Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die (p. 188).

Connection between the two aspects – the seen and the unseen, the prose and the passion, Wilcoxes and Schlegels – is, to Margaret, the very essence of existence. To make continuous excursions between these opposites is to propose that truth is contingent and relationships, fundamental.[53]

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[53] 'Only connect' is indisputably central to Forster's ethos. Critics continue to take this novel's epitaph as key to understanding Forster's philosophy. P. N. Furbank, for instance, related it to Forster's concept of self, writing that 'in order to possess the whole of oneself, one needs to recognise the connection of all the pieces of oneself, of the "beast" with the "monk" and the "prose" with the "passion"', in 'The Philosophy of E. M. Forster', in *E. M. Forster: Centenary Revaluations*, ed. by Judith Scherer Herz and R. K. Martin (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 37 - 51 (p. 40). Similarly, David Medalie, in 'Bloomsbury and Other Values', writes that Forster's 'unremitting preoccupation with "connection" arises from a keen sense […] that the conditions of modernity provoke fragmentation and the absence of social cohesion' (p. 37). In *A Preface to Forster*, Christopher Gillie also situates this epigraph in the sociological context, arguing that it is both 'a judgement on a society which knows no other ways to understand connections, and an appeal to human imagination and sensitivity to take responsibility for accident so as to transform it into meaning and shape coincidence into coherence.' Gillie concludes that Forster 'succeeds brilliantly with the judgement but very unevenly with the appeal' (pp. 123 - 4). Whilst these critics view the problem of connection in terms of society, self, or personal relationships, others have thought of it in terms of the relationship between the visible and the invisible. Horowitz, for example, speaks of this theme as a 'reconciliation between the human and the transcendent realms' (p. 329). Critics tend to only consider this epitaph in relation to Forster's philosophy, however,

For Margaret, Howards End allays the 'sense of flux which had haunted her all the year'; it is a tonic for the unfathomability of London. 'She forgot the luggage and the motor-cars, and the hurrying men who know so much and connect so little.' Starting from Howards End, Margaret attempts to 'realise England'. She fails. However, in this act of contemplation, 'an unexpected love of the island awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable' (p. 204). This ideal love, which connects the separate spheres, had, Margaret concludes, 'certainly come through the house and old Mrs Avery.' The stress laid upon the word 'through' is crucial to understanding the role that Howards End plays in the novel.

> Through them: the notion of 'through' persisted; her mind trembled towards a conclusion which only the unwise have put into words. Then, veering back into warmth, it dwelt on ruddy bricks, flowering plum trees, and all the tangible joys of spring (p. 205).

'Through' figures Howards End as a liminal space; like Mrs Wilcox, it connects the two spheres of the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the ineffable. The communion it effects is, itself, of an unspeakable quality, 'only the unwise have put [it] into words.'

Forster's description of Howards End and his concept of the 'atmosphere' of literature bear a striking resemblance to one another. Atmosphere, like the effect of Howards End, is ineffable, it is 'something else', it is 'indefinable'.[54] In spite of their transcendental associations, Mrs Wilcox and Howards End are 'more real'. Mrs Wilcox 'knew about realities'; Howards End is described by Helen as having a 'surer life than we' (p. 305 and p. 293). The vitality assigned to Howards End – 'houses are alive', asserts Margaret – connects with Margaret's concept of truth, as also 'being alive.'

Too much a part of the daily existence of pickpockets and trams, the Wilcox men are unable to grasp the atmospheric quality of Howards End. To

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there is little attempt to relate or reconcile these readings with the other dualistic dynamics of his writing, particularly his aesthetic.

[54] 'Anonymity', p. 89.

them, it is simply 'a house'; they cannot know that, to Mrs Wilcox (and the Schlegel sisters), 'it had been a spirit' (p. 107). Henry's only means of engaging with the house is to explain the 'use and dimension of the various rooms', to perceive it purely in terms of its tangible quality (p. 205). Whereas to Margaret, the house is significant in terms of the life it sustains, the connections it enables: 'drawing-room, dining-room and hall – how petty the names sounded! Here were simply three rooms where children could play and friends shelter from the rain' (p. 201). It is 'through' Howards End that Margaret realises (to some extent at least) her 'sermon'. Like Mrs Wilcox and Howards End, Margaret is increasingly narrated at the point of convergence between the novel's opposites. As she contemplates the polarity of Henry and Helen, she is described as 'hovering as usual between the two, now accepting men as they are, now yearning with her sister for Truth' (p. 228). Margaret not only defines truth as an oscillation between the two realms, in the mysterious process of her becoming "Mrs Wilcox", she comes to enact it herself. The last chapter of the novel sees the disparate characters – Henry and Helen – brought together by Howards End and Margaret. 'You picked up the pieces', Helen tells her, 'and made us a home' (p. 328). Margaret qualifies this, replying that, 'no doubt I have done a little towards straightening the tangle, but things that I can't phrase have helped me' (p. 329). Again, that 'something else', an ineffable atmosphere, is credited with impacting upon the tangible, rendering it somehow better. The message of the novel is 'only connect', and this is facilitated to some extent through Margaret and Howards End. It is also, however, realised in the novel's aesthetics.

VI

At one point in the story, Margaret contemplates 'the chaotic nature of our daily life, and its difference from the orderly sequence that has been fabricated by historians.' 'Actual life', she decides, 'is full of false clues and signposts that lead

nowhere' (p. 114). A work of art, however, is for Forster, the 'only material object in the universe which may possess internal harmony.' Unlike the chaos of daily life, the novel 'achieves something which has often been promised by society, but always delusively.'[55] *Howards End* is punctuated with repeated images, phrases, and episodes. The fortress, the flower, the wisp of hay, death, the pebble, the abyss, gray, panic and emptiness – all recur throughout, accruing significance and forging connections linking disparate passages of the novel together. Mr Wilcox lacks the ability to connect, and, consequently, fails to 'notice things': 'he never noticed the lights and shades that exist in the grayest conversation, the fingerposts, the milestones, the collisions, the illimitable views' (p. 188). Leonard, in his attempt to see something beyond the gray of daily existence, mistakes books for 'the destination', failing to apprehend them as 'signposts'. The repeated images and phrases of *Howards End* can be read as signposts, each pointing to other instances in the text where they occur. By reading them as such, the reader is able to do what Henry and Leonard could not: to connect.

The characters of *Howards End* gradually become associated with particular images. We often see Leonard in relation to 'gray', Mr Wilcox, with a fortress, Helen, with 'panic and emptiness.' Henry's fortress augments his situation within the concrete. It is the emblematic edifice of the structures that sustain the public sphere of code, conduct, and stalwart ideology. It is also defensive, closing his inner self off from the public domain and the visible world.[56] Helen, on the other hand, is associated with an abstract, intangible quality. She perceives that chaos courses behind the synthetic edifices and structures that reify the public dimension. 'When I saw the others so placid', she says, 'I felt for a moment that the whole Wilcox family was afraid, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness' (p. 39). When Henry's fortress does eventually give way, Helen's suspicion is proved right. The images and phrases associated with the

[55] 'Art for Art's Sake', p. 99.
[56] Margaret perceives the significance of Henry's fortress, recognising it as a force of self preservation: 'England expects every man to open his heart once; but the effort would have jarred him, and never, if she could avoid it, should he lose those defenses that he had chosen to raise against the world' (p. 169).

characters (including, as we have seen, the relation of Leonard to 'gray') locates them within their respective spheres.

The repetition of these evocative images not only keeps the central tension of the novel – the conflict between realms – in the frame of the narrative, it accrues significance by association. Barbara Rosencrance writes that 'Forster's repetitions, themselves echoing earlier usages, develop a meaning made greater through its connections.'[57] Many of the recurrent images and phrases converge, recalling and connecting various disparate fragments at once. These colliding images reach a crescendo in the penultimate chapter of the novel.

> Here Leonard lay dead in the garden, from natural causes; yet life was a deep, deep river, death a blue sky, life was a house, death a wisp of hay, a flower, a tower, life and death were anything and everything, except this ordered insanity, where the king takes the queen, and the ace the king. Ah, no; there was beauty and adventure behind, such as the man at her feet had yearned for; there was hope this side of the grave; there were truer relationships beyond the limits that fetter us now. As a prisoner looks up and sees stars beckoning, so she, from the turmoil and horror of those days, caught glimpses of the diviner wheels (p. 320).

Leonard dies, and at this critical moment, the images that have been repeatedly interspersed throughout the story are ravelled together in climax. Both spheres are simultaneously invoked and muddled. The house, the wisp of hay, and the flower recall the very beginning of the novel, where Mrs Wilcox was described at Howards End by Helen in similar terms: 'trail, trail, went her long dress over the sopping grass, and she came back with her hands full of hay that was cut yesterday', and further down, 'finally Mrs Wilcox reappears, trail, trail, still smelling hay and looking at the flowers' (p. 20). The 'deep, deep river' suggests Margaret as well as the river that murmurs in the background at Oniton. Earlier, whilst condemning the 'continual flux of London', she announced that she 'mistrust[s] rivers' (p. 184). Shortly after, she describes her hope of building a 'rainbow bridge that should connect the prose and the passion', seeking, in a sense, to overcome the river-like flux of daily existence and London (p. 187). Henry is of course invoked in the

[57] Barbara Rosencrance, *Forster's Narrative Vision* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 214.

fortress, as well as in the 'king', as Helen described him as 'king of this world' earlier in the novel (p. 236). This, in turn, invokes thought of Helen, as well as the reference to Death, which preoccupies her throughout. Shortly after describing Henry as 'king', Helen announces that 'Death destroys a man; the idea of Death saves him' (p. 237). These images, then, have already converged and connected elsewhere in the text. Mrs Wilcox and Margaret are also elicited here, but in a more complex way. We might recall Margaret's feeling that Mrs Wilcox 'knows everything, she is everything. She is the house.' This is followed with the pronouncement that 'people have their own deaths as well as their own lives, and even if there is nothing beyond death we shall differ in our nothingness' (pp. 305 – 6). 'Nothing' and 'everything', 'deaths' and 'lives', the 'house' and Mrs Wilcox: this earlier instance of converging repeated images appears again here – though in new form – in the crisis of Leonard's death.

This converging, connecting list of images then leads to a broader exposition of the crisis. Out of the 'senseless[ness]' of these conflicting realms – house and tower, unseen and seen – Margaret perceives 'truer relationships' and 'diviner wheels' beyond the limitations that 'fetter us now'. From this climactic muddling of realms, then, she finds a clarity of vision. The ideals of the private, unseen aspect – truer relationships, and a sense of the beyond – are glimpsed as attainable in the limited, visible aspect; the unseen impacts upon the seen, and 'hope' is realised 'on this side of the grave'. Forster discusses 'pattern' at some length in *Aspects*. '"Pattern",' he said, 'which seems so rigid, is connected with atmosphere, which seems so fluid' (p. 135). The pattern created by connecting and diverging images in *Howards End* effects the atmosphere of Margaret's concept of truth. The fortress, the flower, the wisp of hay, death, the pebble, the abyss, gray, panic and emptiness – all of which evoke the oppositional realms – are interwoven through the narrative in such a way that they provoke connections between these opposing realms, as well as between disparate passages and events of the story. By drawing these connections, the reader makes 'continuous excursions into either realm', and Margaret's ethos is realised in the aesthetic pattern of the text.

For Joseph Conrad, the relationship between the opposite spheres was paradoxically one of simultaneous union and divorce. His depiction of these colliding realms was an expression of a profound discomfort, communicating something of his pessimistic vision. Forster is also preoccupied with these antagonisms. Unlike Conrad, however, Forster's aesthetic and thematic handling of the two realms suggests that a more harmonious reconciliation can be wrought. Just as Margaret views the Wilcoxes as an essential counterpart to Schlegels, Forster's own vision depends upon antagonisms and dualisms. The realist quality of his writing is muddled with a preoccupation with 'the beyond', and the fantastical. The pattern and order of his aesthetic is vitalised with that ineffable quality that Forster called 'atmosphere'.[58] The visible world of telegrams and pickpockets is overarched with an abstract, unseen realm. These 'rigid' and 'fluid' opposites are contingent upon one another, and both Forster's aesthetic and his philosophy depends upon structuring some sort of harmony between the two. Without this connection between the separate aspects, or the 'rainbow bridge' (as Margaret calls it), 'we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man.' 'With it', however, 'love is born, and alights on the highest curve, glowing against the gray, sober against the fire' (p. 187). For Conrad the discomfiture between realms in his literature is an expression of the irresolvable tensions of his age, but for Forster, literature achieves a greater sense of balance, ordering the chaos, infusing the seen with a sense of the unseen.

Despite striking a certain balance, however, the conclusion of *Howards End* does not allow for total reconciliation between the aspects, nor are the tensions of the plot fully resolved.[59] The final chapter seems, in many ways, a

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[58] Writing of the disadvantage of Henry James's 'rigid pattern', Forster says, 'it may externalize the atmosphere, spring naturally from the plot, but it shuts the doors on life and leaves the novelist doing exercises, generally in the drawing room. […] To most readers of fiction the sensation from a pattern is not intense enough to justify the sacrifices that made it, and their verdict is "beautifully done, but not worth doing"', in *Aspects*, p. 145.

[59] Critics have debated whether the ending of this novel qualifies as 'happy' or unsettling. Suzette A. Henke recorded that 'The massed ranks of commentators differ both about whether or not the ending can be seen as happy, and about whether or not the ending is convincing.' Cited in Malcolm Page, *Howards End: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1993), p. 52. Various critics argue that a sense of irresolution derives from the ultimate

return to the beginning of the novel. 'My last page is always latent in my first', as Edith Wharton would say.[60] Margaret has become Ruth Wilcox; bonded to Howards End and the cycle of the seasons. The season is the same as it was in the opening pages, and Henry is confined to inside the house, troubled again by hayfever. But the ostensibly reconciled aspects and repeated events jar. The story ends the day before it begun. In the beginning, Helen tells us that the hay in the field 'was cut yesterday' (p. 20). The novel ends, however, with the following line: '"The field's cut!" Helen cried excitedly – "The big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!"' (p. 332). The narrative falls just shy of coming full circle, and Helen's proclamation that 'we've seen to the very end' seems a false note to conclude on.[61] In what might be an apt summary of the repetitions of this final scene, Mr Wilcox is said to use 'the old phrases, but their effect was unexpected and shadowy' (p. 330). Though the idyll of Howards End seems to offer a harmony between Wilcoxes and Schlegels, the seen and the unseen, this vision of final proportion is threatened by the flux and chaos of modern London. 'London's creeping', observes Helen, 'and London is only part of something else, I'm afraid. Life's going to be melted down, all over the world' (p. 329).[62]

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failure of connection. In 'Forster, the Environmentalist', *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature*, ed. Carola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 171 – 192, Wilfred Stone agrees with Alistair M. Duckworth, writing that 'the novel's project is open-ended and not one proposing solutions to the problems it raises' (p. 174). Citing Duckworth and Stone, Leslie White adds that 'the epigraph exhibits a provisional element that threatens the novel's ostensible thematic aspiration and implies that its formal resolution may be a contrivance' (p. 49). Though Forster wanted connection, 'the various "failures", in the compromised lives and strained, [and] implausible connections' of *Howards End* evidence an overriding 'vital disconnection' (p. 57). Reading the ending of this novel in relation to the dualistic dynamics that course throughout, then, helps to reveal a fundamental irresolution and discomfiture.

[60] Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography*, ed. by Candace Waid (London: Everyman, 1993), p. 137.

[61] Writing of the irresolution in Forster's own character – the 'strange' and somewhat incongruous 'mixture of qualities' that composed his self – Stephen Spender concluded that he was 'one of the most comforting of modern writers and at the same time one of the most uncomfortable.' The same might be said of the unsettled resolution of *Howards End.* In *World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender* (London: Reader's Union, 1953), pp. 143 – 144.

[62] The discomfort of this ending speaks, in part, of the anxiety generated by the ever-encroaching "progression" of modernity. Wilfred Stone argues that '[t]his pattern runs throughout the novel – antipastoral invading pastoral' (p. 176). He continues: '[t]he vision of a machineless world is, Forster recognizes, an impotent fantasy, but he nevertheless clings to that vision as something better than any ideal of "progress"' (p. 187).

Whilst the novel has sought to espouse a harmony between the antithetical aspects, we are left, in the last, with the unsettling anticipation that despite careful negotiation, all may eventually amount to the same. 'Life's going to be melted down.' A creeping, intangible force threatens to nullify all. It is that unformulated, negating force that strikes the dominant note in *A Passage to India*.

VII

In his prefatory note to the 1947 edition of *A Passage to India*, Forster wrote that 'if anyone cares to inquire what my main purpose was, an answer can be found in the subjoined Introduction by Peter Burra.' Forster privileges Burra's brief essay – including it in this, and subsequent editions of *Passage* – because he 'saw exactly what I was trying to do.'[63] First published in *The Nineteenth Century and After* in 1934, Burra deftly grasped the dualism of Forster's fiction. Though the essay is concerned with Forster's *oeuvre*, it is undoubtedly apt for reading *Passage* as the depth of its insights seem to depend largely on the novel in which many of Forster's aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations are worked to their climax.

Echoing Forster's own view, Burra declared that 'real life is chaotic and formless', and the task of the artist is to 'select what seem to him its most significant parts, and to arrange the chaos into some sort of an order.' The 'more "like" life a work of art is, the more nonsensical' that work appears to be. It has been the attempt of modern authors, Burra wrote, to 'dispel the illusion of life's tidiness.' The process of selection amounts to a process of abstraction. In order to approach "truth" in art, the artist can only convey 'the vital spirit of very life' by 'cutting away as much as possible'. This urge toward abstraction is, observes Burra, an 'increasing tendency' in art. Of all art forms, however, the novel 'is the least abstract'; 'the one which has pretended most of all that life is a neat, well-

[63] Forster, Prefatory Note to the 1957 Everyman Edition of *Passage*, Appendix I, in *A Passage to India*, 1924, ed. by Oliver Stallybrass, introd. by Pankaj Mishra (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 307.

patterned affair.'[64] Citing Forster's regret that the novel is tethered to this artificial ordering – the need to 'tell a story' – Burra asked why, then, did he not adopt a more abstract form of art? The answer, he declared (evidently to Forster's satisfaction), owed to the fact that alongside of his desire for an abstract aesthetic expressive of truth, 'he has desires which need a more distinct articulation than music or abstraction can make' (p. 311). Forster required a marriage of the explicit and the abstract so that he could simultaneously depict something of the ineffable experience of the chaos and formlessness of "real life", as well as articulating the 'causes' central to his preoccupations. The dual quality that Virginia Woolf (for one) took issue with was, for Burra, the foundation and strength of Forster's writing.

As well as Forster's style of writing, Burra scrutinised his thematic concerns in terms of their dualism. Each novel has an 'elemental character', wrote Burra; 'one who sees straight through [the] perplexities and complications' of the visible, material world, toward 'the reality behind appearances'. The Mrs Moores and Mrs Wilcoxes of his stories 'prepare the way for the merge of opposites' (p. 319). In discussing the conflicting realms central to the crises of Forster's stories, Burra recognised that not only do they clash, 'they merge as well.' Forster 'realises that, having regard to their common humanity, no two types, however much opposed, can be considered as absolutely distinct' (p. 323). The 'point of view is constantly shifting', says Burra, and it is this fluidity, this interminable oscillation between the dual aspects, that forms the basis of Forster's aesthetic and philosophical vision.

In some ways, Burra's observations are the precursor to this chapter. Not only did he observe the dualistic negotiation between articulation and abstraction, he discussed the pattern and rhythm of Forster's aesthetic. Whereas many critics over the decades have been drawn by these elements of Forster's writing into talking of his 'symbolism', Burra is careful to refer to the repetition of various *leit-motifs* (as he calls them) as 'almost symbols'. Forster's repetition of ostensibly

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[64] Peter Burra, Introduction to the 1942 Everyman Edition, Appendix II, in *Passage*, (first publ. as 'The Novels of E. M. Forster', in *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 1934), pp. 309 – 326 (p. 310).

insignificant episodes or details – the wasp, for example – 'by association with its previous appearance accumulates meaning each time it recurs' (p. 315). The effect is close to symbolic but, significantly, Burra denies symbolism.

> The images which are used as *leit-motifs* fall very little short of becoming symbols. Mr Forster nowhere uses symbols as Mrs Woolf does, translating an inarticulate idea into an image; but he constantly uses images to suggest, by association, more than they themselves signify (p. 316).

Whilst Burra's interpretation of Woolf's symbolism implies a synecdochic concentration of the 'inarticulate' in an image, Forster's repetitive use of images effects an expansion of meaning, an 'opening out', as Forster would say. Woolf's method semiotically encases that abstract concept, infusing the concrete with a sense of the metaphysical; Forster's harks to something beyond the articulated meaning. Burra's reading of Forster's 'almost' symbolism suggests that the pattern and rhythm of Forster's writing effects the abstract quality of his vision. Through the repetition of *leit-motifs* that are not by themselves 'peculiarly significant', these images apparently become charged with a meaning that extends beyond that which they apparently represent. Though Burra is not explicit in connecting Forster's 'almost' symbolism with a process of abstraction, his understanding of the dualistic quality of Forster's writing coupled with his denial of symbolism establishes this essay as an ideal foundation for reading the complex interrelation of the abstract and concrete aspects in *A Passage to India*.

VIII

India is depicted by Forster as essentially undefinable. The characters and events of the story are situated within the flux and formlessness of an ever-evasive setting. The first page of the novel presents Chandrapore almost exclusively in negative terms. In the first line, even, we are told that the 'city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary.' To grasp this city, the narrator dictates that we must understand it in terms of what it is not. 'There are no bathing steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river

front'; the city was 'never large or beautiful'; 'nor was it ever democratic'; 'in the bazaars there is no painting and scarcely any carving'; 'the zest for decoration stopped in the eighteenth century.' Almost no positive attributes are ascribed to the city, and this indeterminacy is exacerbated by an artillery of descriptions associating it with monotony. The city is 'scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely'; 'the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away.' The vagueness is exacerbated further by the addition of another characteristic: flux. Purportedly concrete aspects are liquesced; 'the very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving.' All is 'so abased, so monotonous', that it seems reasonable to expect the Ganges to wash it all away. 'Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life' (p. 5). Though drawn in the negative, still it remains, in a constant state of flux, 'swelling here' and 'shrinking there'.

In an effort to write a poem for Mr Bhattacharya, Aziz is led 'towards the vague and bulky figure of a mother-land [...]. Half closing his eyes, he attempted to love India' (p. 253). This recalls Margaret's attempt to 'realise England' in *Howards End*. Like Aziz's poetic attempt, she also 'fails' in her particular endeavour. However, in her act of contemplation, 'an unexpected love of the island awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable' (p. 204). In both instances, 'love' is a unifying force. Whilst some sort of unity is negotiated 'through' the house in Howards End, the India of *Passage* is characterised by and inflicts disharmony. 'Nothing embraces the whole of India', declares Aziz, 'nothing, nothing' (p. 135). But this quotation not only emphasises India's lack of unity, it emphatically defines it as a negation. 'How can the mind take hold of such a country?', the narrator asks:

> Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. [...] India knows of their trouble. She knows of the whole world's trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls "Come: through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal (p. 127).

India sprawls beyond perception and representation. Whilst western civilisation takes tangible form, in the tropics, 'the inarticulate world is closer at hand' (p. 104).[65] The one positive articulation attributed to India is utterly ambiguous: "[c]ome", she calls, 'through her hundred mouths'. This singular appeal originates from a hundred different unidentifiable sources. 'But come to what' is never defined. No ultimate referent is designated to this sign. The call to 'come' situates India outside of the frame of presence, of immediacy, reinforcing her association with the negative.

Contained within this refrain – 'come' – is the central binary of the novel: presence and absence. The unseen forces - the metaphysical, the negative, the ineffable – depend upon the relationship between these two states. Whilst summoning a presence, the call to 'come' implies an absence. Professor Godbole summarises this binary complication, saying that, 'absence implies presence, absence is not nonexistence, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, "Come, come, come, come"' (p. 167). Despite their essential metaphysicality, then, these unseen forces are not nonexistent. 'Come' is, rather, a negation of presence, an absence. The one is implicit in the other. Maire Jaanus Kurrik describes negation using terminology akin to Godbole's. It is, Kurrik writes, 'an absence yoked to a presence, or a presence-evoking absence.'[66] Kurrik's discussion of negation provides a helpful paradigm for understanding various negative modes of (non)representation in *Passage.*

Rather than a deletion – or nonexistence, as Godbole would call it – negation ought to be regarded as a 'plus action'. Deletion 'omits, erases, cancels', whereas negation 'adds, multiplies, preserves, and separates'. Like Godbole's view of absence and presence, Kurrik adjudges negation and affirmation 'to be inexorably linked' (p. 1). Just as 'come' simultaneously invokes presence and absence, 'negation is addition because it has to include the positive statement it

[65] Returning to Europe, Fielding observes that 'the buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh, these Italian churches!' (p. 265).

[66] Maire Jaanus Kurrik, *Literature and Negation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 207.

seeks to deny in its assertion. Negation superimposes itself on an assertion' (p. 207). Kurrik refers to Nietzsche's monistic philosophy and Beckett's *The Unnameable* in her illustration of the use of negation as a method of communication. Both Nietzsche and Beckett are, she writes, 'aware and tired of the limitation and tyranny of the old polarity' between negation and affirmation, 'and its dialectical processes' (p. 229). For Nietzsche, the supposition that these two aspects are 'inevitable polar opposites' is a fallacy, ' an illusion by which we have allowed ourselves to be dominated. They simply are' (p. 215). Godbole's philosophy is more relativistic than it is dualistic. Good and evil are accorded the same mutual immanence as presence and absence:

> When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs. And similarly when suffering occurs, and so on and so forth, and everything is anything and nothing something (p. 167).

Godbole eliminates the independent existence of polarities, asserting that 'nothing can be performed in isolation.' Rather, 'all perform a good action, when one is performed, and when an evil action is performed, all perform it' (p. 166). With the elimination of the absolutist concept of good and evil/ affirmation and negation as fundamentally opposed, 'negation's relationship to an unknown, a new', writes Kurrik, 'is far more clearly delineated and more consequently explored.' She continues:

> Negation, by stressing its subtracting power, refuses to return to a single, immobile centre from which all its activity will appear as but the distortion or repression of some primal truth. Negation now shifts, unfixes, and decentres the very idea of such a centre while aiming to become deletion, which would make the centre disappear altogether' (p. 230).

As negation necessarily invokes both presence and absence, it has an expansive, pluralising potential for meaning. Kurrik stresses its fluid, amorphous quality, as it 'shifts, unfixes, and decentres', and ensures its dissociation from the absolute: 'a primal truth' and 'a single, immobile centre'. The vague formlessness of Forster's

India, its proximity to the inarticulate, and lack of a fixed centre aligns it with the concept of negation.

Kurrik's description of Nietzsche's negative reconception of the body has parallels with the disunity of Forster's India. Rather than a unified entity, 'the body is a flow of forces, a mobile, contradictory, multiple flow, coming to expression in a scattering, dispersal, and fragmentation' (p. 214). The disunity, fluidity, and formlessness of Nietzsche's vision of the body corresponds to Forster's vision of India: both are irreducible to absolute meaning, both are indescribable by any singular, fixed referent. India is not a promise, as the narrator tells us, it is only an appeal. The negative figuration of India, therefore, situates it outside of the frame of the familiar, beyond the conventional limitations of language. This effects a sense of the 'atmosphere' that only art can realise, the undefinable 'something else'.[67] As Wolfgang Iser said: 'there will always be something which is never given in the world and which only a work of art provides: it enables us to transcend that which we are otherwise so inextricably tangled in – our own lives in the midst of the real world.'[68] The non-referential and negative quality of Forster's India situates it beyond the bounds of common perception, figuring it as transcendental of the tangible, knowable dimension. Imbued with a sense of the unseen, unspeakable, and the metaphysical, the negatively rendered setting of this novel might be though of as an abstract manifestation.

The Marabar Caves and Hills are the ultimate realisation of the abstract aesthetic in *A Passage to India*. They are said to predate mankind, gods, even. This 'primal' quality alone is enough to associate them with artistic ideas of the abstract as something predating civilisation (p. 115). The ineffable quality that is repeatedly ascribed to them augments this abstraction. Speaking of the hills, the narrator tells us that 'there is something unspeakable in these outposts', and the reputation of the caves is not communicable in 'human speech' (pp. 115 – 116). Two words in particular attach to the caves and hills: 'extraordinary', and 'nothing'. The first line of the novel informs us of the 'extraordinary' quality of

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[67] 'Anonymity', p. 89.
[68] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge, 1976, repr. 1978), p. 230.

the caves, and this short first chapter closes with a reiteration of that quality: 'these fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves' (p. 7). The second of the three sections of the novel – entitled 'Caves' – opens, like chapter one, with a short chapter describing the Indian landscape. In this instance, the Marabar Hills and Caves. The outposts of the hills are described as being 'like nothing else in the world', 'they bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen.' They are so beyond the scope of the familiar, that even the pilgrim in search of the extraordinary 'had here found too much of it.' Anticipating Aziz's later assertion that 'nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing', the following is said of the caves:

> Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation – for they have one – does not depend on human speech. It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim "Extraordinary!" and the word has taken root in the air, and been exhaled by mankind (p. 116).

As with the first line of the novel, 'extraordinary' appears in tandem here with 'nothing'. Via repetition and pattern, 'nothing' and 'extraordinary' become almost synecdochic of the caves. The coupling of these two words is unsettling. Both terms supersede the realm of common perception. Yet whilst 'extraordinary' intends a conceptual "raising up", a "going beyond", or a transcendentalism, 'nothing' speaks of a nullification, an oblivion. Returning from the caves to Chandrapore, the visitor finds himself 'uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all' (p. 116). An interesting experience might derive from their extraordinary quality, but the "nothingness" of the caves might negate experience altogether. The muddling of these terms, and the ambiguity they individually and collaboratively generate is enactive of Godbole's assertion that 'everything is anything and nothing something.' Just as 'come' implies both a presence and an absence, so is Forster's depiction of the Marabar Caves composed of positive and negative extremes, the combination of which imposes a peculiar nullifying effect.

In a follow up essay to *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode draws a connection between Derrida's concept of 'différance' and the Marabar Caves:

> Shortly I shall have to speak of *place*, of what Derrida names *Khora*; and the caves are a kind of figure of that place, always already in place, without dimension or direction, not a realm, not a being-present yet not an absence; the rhythms are the rhythms of negativity itself.[69]

As with Kurrik's concept of negativity, the caves here are not nonexistent, rather, they figure an interval between being-present and not-being. Unlike the 'insane' and proportionless hills, the caves are 'readily described' as an interminable series of monotonous, invariable repetitions. Having described the exact dimensions and shape of a cave, we are told that 'this arrangement occurs again and again and again throughout the group of hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar cave' (p. 116). In addition to those caves that are accessible, 'deeper in the granite' there are thought to be 'chambers which have no entrances', 'four hundred of them, four thousand or million',

> Nothing is inside them, […] if mankind grew curious and excavated, nothing, nothing would be added to the sum of good or evil. One of them is rumoured within the boulder that swings on the summit of the highest of the hills; a bubble-shaped cave that has neither ceiling nor floor, and mirrors its own darkness in every direction infinitely (p. 117).

Repetition tends to nullify, so the repetition of 'nothing' seems an assured means of emptying the caves of meaning. 'Nothing' is also effected by the perpetuity of the darkness. The bubble-shaped cave is not only without conventional form – having 'neither ceiling nor floor' – it reflects darkness back upon itself 'infinitely', generating a self-perpetuating eternal nothingness. In the introduction to *Languages of the Unsayable*, the editors describe *khora* as signifying 'something that is neither a being nor a nothingness' (p. xv). In terms similarly evasive, Derrida attributes to it 'nothing positive or negative. It is impassive, but is neither passive nor active."[70] Adding 'nothing' to 'the sum of good or evil', the caves are, like that figured by *khora*, apathetic in their quality, and liminal in their state.

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[69] Frank Kermode, 'Endings, Continued', *Languages of the Unsayable*, pp. 71 – 94 (p. 75).
[70] Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', translated by Ken Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable*, pp. 3 – 70 (p. 37).

How do the nullifying caves serve the semiotics of the text? Kermode's connection between Derrida's concept of *khora* and différance with the place figured by Forster's caves is important, particularly for Derrida's insistence that différance is not to be in any way considered 'in place of God, or in a place resembling that of God, or indeed in any *place* at all.'[71] We are told that the caves predate 'the arrival of the gods', and it is paramount to their effect that their abstract quality is not seeded with any theism or deity.[72] Mrs Moore's experience at the Marabar shrinks 'poor little talkative Christianity' to insignificance, rendering her as apathetic as the evasive, liminal caves. Religion is evidently not the key to unlocking the ineffability of the Marabar Caves, as this too is dwarfed by the proliferating nothingness they resonate. The editors of *Languages of the Unsayable* explain that, to comprehend negativity, one must regard it in terms of its function, rather than its meaning:

> In order to evoke the multifariousness of negativity and to suggest how it can allow the unsayable to speak, negativity can only be described in terms of its *operation*, and not by any means in terms of a graspable entity (pp. xii – xiii).

Though they range over various types of negativity, handling it in different ways, the essays of this volume all 'refuse the consolidation of negativity into something that can be appropriated' (pp. xiv – xv). To grasp the potential negativity has for speaking of the unspeakable, one must preserve its ambiguous quality, and look instead at its function and effect in relation to the familiar and descriptive aspect of the text.

IX

[71] 'Endings', p. 76.

[72] The narrator documents various failed attempts by religion to colonise the caves: 'Hinduism has scratched and plastered a few rocks, but the shrines are unfrequented, as if pilgrims, who generally seek the extraordinary, had here found too much of it. Some saddhus did once settle in a cave, but they were smoked out, and even Buddha, who must have passed this way down to the Bo Tree of Gaya, shunned a renunciation more complete than his own, and has left no legend of a struggle or victory in the Marabar' (p. 116).

The echo is the ultimate communication of the unsayable in Forster's abstraction. It is 'entirely devoid of distinction', 'monotonous', and 'utterly dull', yet the "bou-oum" and "ou-boum" of the echo functions as a nullifying force, undermining the beliefs and truths that had hitherto defined the characters' existence. The articulation "boum" is, we are told, 'the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it' (p. 137). Its indistinction means it barely has a linguistic referent, and the one that comes closest to speaking of it has no other referentiality beyond that echo. Irrespective of what prompts the echo, the sound produced is the same: "boum". The more the echo is described, the more indistinction it spreads and the further one is from any tangible sense of meaning. Mrs Moore's experience of the echo comes closest to revealing the function of its effect:

> The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. […] [I]t had managed to murmur: "Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value". If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same – "ou-boum" (p. 139).

The echo is nullifying. Not, however, of existence itself, rather, of the values and meanings that define that existence. 'Everything exists, nothing has value', has echoes in Godbole's assertion that 'everything is anything and nothing something' (p. 167). The echo levels oppositions that conventionally determine value. Vileness and lofty poetry are returned by the echo as the same, as a Nietzschean monism is exerted in place of dualism. The echo is anti-referential; it strips things of their meaning and association. All amounts 'to the same', the echo and the Marabar rob 'infinity and eternity of their vastness, the one quality that accommodates them to mankind' (p. 139).

Forster thought of linguistic expression as essentially negative. He described the 'world created by words' as 'the shadow of a shadow. We can best define it by negations.' He continued:

> It is not this world, its laws are not the laws of science or logic, its conclusions not those of common sense. And it causes us to suspend our ordinary judgements. [73]

Like the echo, the rendering of the world in language is definable only in negations and is itself a negative process. But the negative quality of something does not exclude it from generating atmosphere or effect. Though Forster regards literature as a 'shadow of a shadow' – doubly removed from the thing itself – it has the power to take us beyond our 'ordinary judgements', and outside of the common frame of perception. The echo, likewise, is 'entirely devoid of distinction', but has a profound bearing upon our perception and understanding of the familiar. Like the 'world created by words', it thwarts logical and conventional systems of understanding – 'the laws of science and logic' – encouraging us to perceive in a new, expansive way. As with "come", there is in Forster's depiction of the echo both an implicit presence and absence, an atmosphere and negation.

Emmanuel Levinas' theory of *'there is'* supplies a helpful discourse for understanding the nature of the non-referential in *Passage*. Levinas introduces the term '*there is*' to speak of the 'paradoxical existence' of something and nothing, or 'existence without existents'.[74] He speaks of '*there is*' as an 'impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable "consummation" of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself.' It 'resists a personal form', and is, rather, 'being in general' (p. 30). Night provides the best analogy for figuring *there is*:

> When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence (p. 30).

Both negative and absent, the echo – like darkness – dissolves the familiar, and invades the lives of those that experience it, Adela and Mrs Moore particularly,

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[73] 'Anonymity', p. 90.
[74] Emmanuel Levinas, 'There is: Existence without Existents', 1946, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 29 - 36 (p. 35).

like a presence.[75] Darkness provides an apt image, given Forster's appropriation of that realm for speaking of the unspeakable in *Maurice*, and his association of this quality with abstraction, metaphysics, and the unseen. In *Passage*, the nullifying echo, rather than darkness, is the primary source of negation. To describe its effect upon Mrs Moore, however, Forster returns to a favourite image: twilight.

> She had come to that state where the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time – the twilight of the double vision in which so many elderly people are involved. […] But in the twilight of the double vision a spiritual muddledom is set up for which no high-sounding words can be found; we can neither act nor refrain from action, we can neither ignore nor respect Infinity (pp. 195 – 6).

Twilight is used again to figure the mergence of two oppositional realms. The echo dwarfs what was previously known; 'poor little talkative Christianity' becomes insufficient for speaking of the universe; 'infinity and eternity' are robbed of their 'vastness', the only designation that 'accommodates them to mankind' (p. 139). Levinas describes the experience of *there is* as one of 'horror', which occurs because a 'subject is stripped of his subjectivity, of his power to have private existence' (p. 33). Mrs Moore experiences the 'horror of the universe', as she contemplates the inevitability of nonexistence. The echo is a muddle of opposites: absence and presence, contraction and expansion, nullification and assertion. Just as 'no high-sounding words' can express this 'spiritual muddledom', Forster's repeated return to negativity suggests that positive affirmation is somehow insufficient for a full or true expression of that which he wishes to speak of. In *there is*, 'there is not "something" that remains', Levinas writes. Rather, there is 'the atmosphere of presence, which can […] appear later as a content, but originally is the impersonal, non-substantive event of the night and the *there is*.' That 'atmosphere', for Levinas, is 'like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is being, like a field of forces' (p. 35).

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[75] Describing the pervasive and lingering presence of the echo, we are told that: 'the echo flourished, raging up and down like a nerve in the faculty of her hearing, and the noise in the cave, so unimportant intellectually, was prolonged over the surface of her life. […] The sound had spouted after her when she escaped, and was going on still like a river that gradually floods the plain' (p. 183).

Forster's abstract devices – the darkness, the cave, the echo – though negative in their formulation, are forceful in their effect. Their quality of 'universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence.'[76] Though not a proper articulation of 'something', they, nevertheless, generate an 'atmosphere', 'like a murmur of silence', as Levinas says or, in Forster's terms, that 'element in words that is not information'.[77]

In *Languages of the Unsayable*, we are told that 'what allows the unsayable to speak is the undoing of the spoken through negativity.' Budick and Iser explain that 'since the spoken is doubled by what remains silent, undoing the spoken gives voice to the inherent silence which itself helps stabilize what the spoken is meant to mean' (p. xvi). More so than in his earlier works, Forster invokes the unsayable, the unsaid, in *Passage* as a crucial means of achieving his effect. The 'spoken', or familiar aspect is, to a certain extent, 'undone' by these negative, nullifying forces. 'Everything exists, nothing has value.' Just as the flux and chaos of London threatens to 'melt down' the carefully negotiated realms in the final page of *Howards End*, here the nullifying forces threaten to undermine the familiar structures of meaning. Despite this disconcertion of logic and sense, as the various theories of negativity have anticipated, the effect is that of a 'pluralising force', 'the spoken is doubled by what remains silent', 'there is being, like a field of forces.'[78] Just as the 'world in words' is best defined, according to Forster, 'by negations', so too does he apply this method to his attempt to push language beyond the conventional limitations of the sayable. Negativity, in *Passage*, 'allows the unsayable to speak'.

X

There is no shortage of critics who suppose that *Passage* can be explained in terms of symbolism. This particular response began in the first year of the book's publication, and has continued unabated since. In a review of the novel,

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[76] 'There is', p. 30.
[77] 'Anonymity', p. 89.
[78] Kurrik, p. 210; Budick and Iser, p. xvi; Levinas, p. 35.

John Middleton Murray confidently asserted that 'a cave of Marabar is the symbol of the universe for Mr Forster.'[79] Barbara Rosencrance argued that the incident in the Marabar Caves is an episode of 'symbolic revelation.' The echo – the symbol of 'human inadequacy' – is generated by the 'novel's central symbol of caves', that represent the 'metaphysical abyss that confronts contemporary man' (p. 184). Ellin Horowitz likewise regards *Passage* as 'a strategy for dealing with a situation symbolically' (p. 327). Frederick C. Crews declares it 'an intricately symbolic novel, in which the slightest details of landscape or plot can carry hints of transcendental secrets' (p. 139). Given that Crews' study of Forster is entitled *The Perils of Humanism*, it is not surprising that he interprets 'the dominant symbol of the Marabar caves and their echoes' as destructive of the 'humanistic moral' (p. 139). In *Symbolism in the Novels of E. M. Forster*, Lakshmi Prakash aims to establish the 'true merit' of Forster 'as a symbolist in the main stream of the English novel."[80] This, it would seem, involves a rigid programme of assigning the "symbol" to a category, and translating its "meaning" accordingly: 'thus we have tried to reduce the innumerable variations of Forster's symbols to their two main types: (1) Conventional or Recognized symbols, and (a) Literary Symbols with their seven inter-linked groups' (p. 108). Lakshmi reads *Passage* (mostly) in 'the light of Indian thought' (p. 192). This method leads to a series of statements (the Marabar Hills 'symbolise the ancient mythical past and the mystical heritage of India'), and suppositions ('it appears to me that Forster is referring to the myth of Agastya and the Vindya Mountains in his remark') (p. 193). These (and other) symbolic readings of Forster claim to "discover" the meaning hidden from view.

It is important to note the discrepancy here between the implied definition of symbolism according to these critics, and that of the Symbolist movement, developed by the French Symbolists, and propounded in Britain by the likes of Arthur Symons. According to these critical readings, Forster's "symbolism" points to some seeded meaning, a covert theme, idea, or socio-political reference. The

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[79] John Middleton Murray, 'Bo-oum or Ou-boum?', *Adelphi*, 2 July 1924, in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 237.
[80] Lakshmi Prakash, *Symbolism in the Novels of E. M. Forster* (Delhi: Seema Publications, 1987), p. v.

symbolic images *represent*, for these critics, as they accord them explanations like 'human inadequacy' (according to Rosencrance) or branches of Indian thought (according to Prakash). Symons and the Symbolist movement, however, contradict this understanding of the symbol as essentially descriptive. In their emphasis upon the mystical, magical, unformulated quality of the symbol, their definition of symbolism actually comes close to aligning with Forster's 'almost symbols', as Burra calls them. In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Arthur Symons describes the symbol as the means 'by which the soul of things can be made visible'. Symbolism is 'an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically.'[81] Understood in these unformulated, transcendental terms, Forster's rhythm and repetition might safely be thought of as a type of symbolism. These techniques and effects, however, ought not be read (as they often are) according to a definition of the symbol as something with an ultimate referent, as something that describes.

One can see why *Passage* prompts this type of symbolic interpretation. The mystery of the incident in the Marabar Caves, the constant allusion to things unsaid, and the formlessness of the landscape all suggest themselves as ambiguities that might fruitfully be comprehended as symbolic of something. Denis Godfrey adds that it is Forster's 'postulation of a transcendent reality', and the relation of 'the unseen to the seen' which accounts in part 'for the intense preoccupation of so many critics with the author's use of symbolism' (p. 4). Woolf's pitting of Forster's realist aspect against a 'symbolic' certainly seems a reaction to this relationship. In addition to these however, there is one particular quality in Forster's writing that provokes symbolic interpretation, that which he refers to as 'rhythm'.

Rhythm is produced by the repetition and development of minutiae, images, or 'little phrases' as Forster called them. He described the recurring 'little phrase' as being 'almost an actor' in the story's drama, 'but not quite'. The 'not

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[81] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 1899, introd. by Richard Ellmann (New York: Dutton, rev. ed. 1919, 1958), p. 5.

quite' means that – rather than plot – it belongs more to the aesthetic process of weaving the text into an interconnected whole, 'towards the establishment of beauty and the ravishing of the reader's memory.' He continues:

> There are times when the little phrase – from its gloomy inception, through the sonata, into the septet – means everything to the reader. There are times when it means nothing and is forgotten, and this seems to me the function of rhythm in fiction: not to be there all the time like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope.[82]

The repetition of the little phrase traces connections throughout the narrative, recollecting past instances of the phrase forward into the new instance.[83] The phrase or image falls, at times, from the attention of the reader, as the narrative moves on to other focuses. At other times, however, it 'means everything to the reader' as it accrues significance with each repetition and recollection. The repeated but unexplained concentration of the narrative upon certain minutiae, especially in *Passage*, steeps them in mystery, intensifying their intrigue. Writing of Ibsen's 'so-called' symbolism, Forster observed that objects that have been imbued with mystery 'throb', 'with beckonings, tremblings, sudden compressions of the air'.[84] The same might be said of the suggestive quality of Forster's recurring little phrases. As the reader's attention is repeatedly focused upon a single image, that referent seemingly becomes charged with signalling something more than what is represented. It is at this point that, for many, the repetition of minutiae proliferate as symbols; symbols that intend a hidden meaning, that covertly describe. It is this type of symbolic reading, however, which I seek to dispute here.

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[82] *Aspects*, p. 148.

[83] In *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Harold Bloom cites Kierkegaard's differentiation between repetition and recollection, describing them as the 'same movement, only in opposite directions'. '[F]or what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards,' Kierkegaard says, 'whereas repetition properly so called is recollected forwards' (p. 82). Encompassed in this idea is a sense of moving ahead, of expansion. It is helpful to regard Forster's rhythm in this sense.

[84] 'Ibsen the Romantic', *Abinger Harvest*, pp. 95 – 101 (p. 98).

The musical quality of Forster's 'rhythm' contravenes a symbolic interpretation.[85] Music, for Forster, was the art form that came closest to expressing life. In 'Not Listening to Music', he wrote that 'the music which is untrammelled and untainted by reference is obviously the best sort of music to listen to; we get nearer the centre of reality.'[86] Forster didn't seek total abstraction, however. He recognised that 'though it is untainted, it is never abstract; it is not like mathematics, even when it uses them.' In addition to its abstract quality, it still bears elements – melody, structure, and so on – that relate it to a familiar, referential frame. The strength of music, for Forster, lay in the fact that, 'more than the other arts', it 'postulates a double existence. It exists in time, and also exists outside time, instantaneously.'[87] As with his own artistic vision, then, music depends upon a dualism between the familiar and the abstract. Its pattern, rhythm, and structure situates it within the frame of time, but its non-referential, abstract quality situates it beyond that limitation. It is this 'double existence' which renders it the closest representation of 'reality', and it is this, therefore, which prompts Forster to connect the two realms in his literature via patterns that effect something of a musical quality. His description of his rhythmic aesthetic depends upon an association with music. He defines it as 'repetition plus variation', remarking that 'in music fiction is likely to find its nearest parallel' (p. 149).[88] The repetition and development of an image, a little phrase, effects a progression and a momentum. 'Done badly', however, 'rhythm is most boring, it hardens into a symbol, and instead of carrying us on it trips us up' (p. 148). If his rhythm is to realise something of the fluidity and effect of music in language, then it must, to some extent, be maintained as essentially abstract. The

[85] Peter Childs stresses the importance of regarding Forster's rhythm as undetermined, stating, 'Forster's symbols do not add up to a coherent system or argument. They create a musical rhythm within the text, but they are not there to refer to an ultimate reality' (p. 202).
[86] 'Not Listening to Music', *Two Cheers*, p. 136.
[87] 'The Raison D'Être of Criticism in the Arts', p. 126.
[88] In *Concerning E. M. Forster* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009) Frank Kermode tells us that 'According to Benjamin Britten, Forster was our "most musical novelist"' (p. 28).

symbol is described as concrete, as 'hard', because it can be ascribed definite meaning.[89] The symbol, for Forster, is therefore the antithesis of abstraction.

Krzysztof Fordoński has attempted to correct what he has perceived to be the flaws in past symbolic interpretations. Singling out Lakshmi's study, he adjudges it 'an honourable failure'.[90] The reason for this failure, he argues, owes to Lakshmi's lack of a comprehensive system; 'in most cases his analytical part consists only of presentation of randomly chosen examples' (p. 23). Fordoński proposes that 'a theoretical framework as comprehensive as possible is necessary to allow a complete presentation of the symbolic level […]. Any narrow definition would only lead to leaving out a vital part of these symbolic systems' (p. 12). Fordoński does, however, support symbolist interpretation, asserting that 'the task of the reader is thus to continually translate the subtext into the story' (p. 28). His method of doing this combines two systems of analysis: interpretation via established symbols, and Riffaterre's symbolic systems.

Of Forster's aversion to symbolism, Fordoński warns that one must 'bear in mind that his concepts are these of a writer and not a literary theorist. One should not overestimate their value as a possible framework for literary analysis even in respect of Forster's own works' (p. 18). In short, one is to disregard Forster's derisory view of the symbol as a product of a hardened rhythm. His concepts are dismissed as 'rather vague', as he tends to suggest interpretations rather than 'putting anything plainly, a method surprisingly similar to that which he applies in his fiction' (p. 20). Fordoński's method imposes a system of understanding, one intended to explain the instances of writing which, like Forster's theoretical concepts, are so 'vague'. His analysis focuses on details – clothes, colour, kisses, and the like – drawing out the classical symbolic associations and other "implicit" references. 'Very often', says Fordoński, 'the objects and words he chooses […] carry traditionally established symbolic meanings, which, rather unsurprisingly, correspond with the meaning of scenes, characters or whole novels' (p. 33). He

[89] It is notable that – like various critics who interpret certain images of his writing as symbolic – Forster understands the symbol in more definite and limiting terms, unlike the Symbolist movement.

[90] Krzysztof Fordoński, *The Shaping of the Double Vision: The Symbolic Systems of the Italian Novels of Edward Morgan Forster* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 22.

also 'assume[s]' that 'Forster builds his symbolic systems as they are defined by Rifaterre [*sic*]' which leads to the supposition that there runs a symbolic subtext beneath that which is given (p. 33). Fordoński's emphasis upon surface text and symbolic subsurface aligns with Forster's understanding of the symbol as 'hard', and essentially antithetical to the abstract. 'Forster's symbolism', he claims, 'is not meant to suggest the unknown, it aims at a better representation of his social and humanist themes rather than at awaking hidden layers of human soul even if the writer may well resort to them' (p. 25).[91] For critic and author, the symbol is inherently attached to the concrete, familiar aspect – the 'social and humanist themes' – rather than the abstract, ineffable, 'unknown'. But to deny that Forster's 'rhythm' is a generator of the unknown is to strip it of its musical quality. It is clear that the symbol, as a concrete referent, and the unknown, as unformulated and abstract, are antithetical. Fordoński's assumption that the ambiguous or apparently 'symbolic' aspects of Forster's writing are indicative of a concrete subtext is, however, flawed, given the negative quality of Forster's aesthetic.

Iser observed that negativity functions like a symbol, writing that both trace out 'the non-given by organising things into meaningful configurations.' Unlike negativity, however, 'the symbol is formulated and acts as a visible frame within which the relevant material is organised and subsumed.' He defined the symbol in figurative, concrete terms. Whereas:

> Negativity, precisely because it remains unformulated, allows mental images to penetrate into the textual positions themselves, and as these have not been reduced to a fixed representational unit – as is the case with the symbol – they are simply material to be built up in to a coherent whole by the reader's process of ideation.[92]

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[91] Like various other critics who have read Forster's rhythm as symbolic, Fordoński evidently thinks of the symbol in terms that oppose the Symbolist movement's definition. Yeats described the symbol as 'the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame', cited in *Romantic Image*, by Frank Kermode (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957, repr. 1961), p. 113. Fordoński's reading of it, however, as a 'representation' of 'social and humanist themes', and refutation of any connection to the 'hidden layers of human soul' demonstrates a disregard for Yeats's (and, by extension, the Symbolist Movement's) definition of the symbol.

[92] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 226.

According to Iser, negativity is antithetical to symbolism. Just as Forster regarded symbolism as the product of a 'hardening' of rhythm, Iser conceived of it in reductive, limited terms. The symbol is a 'fixed representational unit', as its hidden associations (or subtext, as Fordoński would say) are determined. Whereas negativity is 'unformulated', and characterised by indefinitude and non-referentiality. In negativity, possible meaning proliferates; in the symbol, however, meaning is contained. Kurrik also defines negativity in opposition to symbolism, writing that, 'negation, taken as the antonym of symbolic, is diabolic, a "tearing apart", a sundering, separating, dividing, alienating, dissociating. It is linked to the dispersed, the dismembered, the disparate, to the idea of many, to becoming' (p. 1). Kurrik describes negativity as opposed to fixity. By describing it in terms of detachment, she stresses its non-referential quality; it refuses definite association. Its limitless, unformulated character therefore links it to the 'idea of many' and 'becoming', rather than the static, reductive quality of the symbolic.

To read Forster's rhythm as symbolic (in this way) is to ignore its abstract essence. Images and little phrases are repeated and developed throughout *Passage* – the echo, the wasp, the arch, 'come', 'not yet', and so on – suggesting them as significant of something more than that which they basically represent. Yet of what, we are not told. It is as Godbole articulates in the third instance of the wasp: '[o]ne old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp […]. It does not seem much, still, it is more than I am myself' (p. 276). Kermode tells us that 'everything is relevant if its relevance can be invented […]. The novel imitates historiography in this: anything can take its important place in the concord, a beerpull in a Joycean pub, a long-legged Indian wasp."[93] One suspects that there must be a "reason" for including the incidental detail of a wasp three times.[94] That "reason", however, need not be symbolic. Writing of Forster's rhythm, E. K.

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[93] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p. 56.

[94] It is as Reuben A. Brower observed in 'Beyond E. M. Forster: The Unseen', 'the apparently casual image is not merely casual.' As we read, argued Brower, 'we have a growing sense of interrelatedness […]. [W]e discover in Forster both remarkable harmonies and peculiar confusions.' In *Chicago Review*, 3, 2 (1948), 102 – 112 (p. 102).

Brown calls these repeated phrases 'expanding symbols' (p. 98). They are 'mysterious' and 'manifold in meaning'. 'I am not sure', he writes, 'that any reader of the novel will ever possess all that has been flung into these chapters' (p. 103). It is the combination as well as the repetition that renders these phrases mysterious in quality and potentially multivalent. Brown is more concerned with judging the effect of these 'expanding symbols' than he is with isolating their purported meaning. Ambiguity is, to a certain extent, maintained by this critic as a feature of Forster's rhythm.

To fully grasp the effect of Forster's rhythm one must appreciate that its lack of formulation is fundamental to its function in the novel. In the absence of a clear meaning, the repetition of little phrases is a stimulus for connection. Again, Iser's theory of textual blanks and negations proves a useful paradigm for understanding Forster's rhythm.

Iser explained that instead of furnishing the unformulated aspects of the text with a final signified, the reader seeks to forge connections between these aspects: 'the need for completion is replaced here by the need for combination' (p. 182). The process of connection generates meaning, as well as drawing the text into a coherent, ordered whole. Though mysterious in quality, then, the repetition of the little phrases plays a key role in the concord and dynamics of the text. Iser writes:

> As an empty space they are nothing in themselves, and yet as a "nothing" they are a vital propellant for initiating communication (p. 195).

As connections are drawn between recurring phrases, associations accrue. Disparate passages of the text are recollected in new circumstances, lines of communication are traced between earlier and later stages in the story, weaving the narrative together. On one level, then, Forster's rhythm helps to construct the 'internal order' achievable only in art. It's 'power' as Forster would say, has gone towards 'stitching' the 'book together from the inside.'[95] Of greater importance,

[95] *Aspects*, p. 148. Or, as Iser would say, the connected blanks and negations 'are the unseen joints of the text' (p. 183).

however, is the emphasis upon the process of connection itself. The aesthetics of the novel enact the message central to Forster's philosophy: 'only connect'.

The novel's final message is one of thwarted connection. In the last page, Fielding and Aziz wish to be friends,

> But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace [...]: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "No, not yet", and the sky said, "No, not there" (p. 306).

This closing paragraph is a peculiar combination of connection and estrangement, resolution and irresolution. Various little phrases reappear here – the rocks, the landscape, the edifices, the hundred voices – but each one enforces a separation, as well as (or perhaps in spite of) invoking connections to earlier passages in the novel. 'Not yet', 'not there' is the eventual, though in no way ultimate, response to the novel's main refrain, 'come'. Like that refrain, it paradoxically figures both a presence and an absence, a negative being. All of this final paragraph is written in the negative: 'didn't want', 'swerved apart', 'no, not [...]'. But the denial of connection is not resolute. Like Forster's negative descriptions, this ending maintains the possibility of something -'not *yet*' – rather than ending the text absolutely – "never".

'Was the cycle beginning again?' asks Aziz, as he finds himself repeating elements of his meeting with Mrs Moore at the very beginning of the novel with her son, Ralph, towards the end of the novel (p. 297):

> Those words – he had said them to Mrs Moore in the mosque at the beginning of the cycle, from which, after so much suffering, he had got free. Never be friends with the English! Mosque, caves, mosque, caves. And here he was starting again (p. 296).

As with *Howards End*, a cycle of repetition is posited here in the revolution of events. In coming to the end, we find ourselves, in some ways, back at the beginning. 'Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending', as George Eliot

explains in *Middlemarch*.[96] Via these complicated connections, therefore, the novel's ending is a simultaneous closing and opening, a contraction and an expansion. For Forster, music achieves 'expansion', 'not completion. Not rounding off but an opening out.'[97] The repetition draws the reader's attention back into the text, whilst the irresolution effects a feeling of continuance.

The familiar dualism that characterises Forster's thematic concerns – whether figured in the convergence of Wilcoxes and Schlegels, India and England, light and dark – is perpetuated here in the irresolute ending.[98] As ever, it is the navigation and connection between two poles that appeals to Forster as 'more "real" than anything'.[99] The rhythmic, musical quality of his writing – the connections encouraged between disparate, ambiguous features of the text – promotes connection as a means of establishing order in the face of instability.[100] For Forster, it is the 'double-existence' of music – its combination of 'rigid' pattern and 'fluid' atmosphere, expression and inarticulacy – that makes it most adept for speaking of the unspeakable.[101] It is this double-existence which we have seen translated into the aesthetics and the concern of Forster's writing.

Speaking of his attempt to render the life of his friend, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, in writing, Forster said that:

> […] a biography of him, if it succeeded, would resemble him; it would achieve the unattainable, express the inexpressible, turn the passing into the everlasting. Have I done that? *Das Unbeschreibliche hier ist's getan?* No.

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[96] Cited in J. Hillis Miller, 'The Problematic of Ending in Narrative', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 1, 33, Special Issue: Narrative Endings (1978), 3 – 7 (p. 6). Or, as T. S. Eliot wrote in 'Little Gidding': '[a]nd to make an end is to make a beginning'. In *The Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974, repr. 2002), pp. 201 – 209 (p. 208).
[97] *Aspects*, p. 149.
[98] The ending is strangely reminiscent of Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence, described in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in the following convolute terms: '[a]t each moment Being beginneth; about every Here revolveth the ball *There*. The centre is everywhere. Curved is the pathway of eternity – ' (p. 194).
[99] 'Not Listening to Music', p. 135.
[100] E. K. Brown confirms this, stating that 'to express what is both an order and a mystery rhythmic processes, repetitions with intricate variations, are the most appropriate of idioms' (p. 114).
[101] '"Pattern", which seems so rigid, is connected with atmosphere, which seems so fluid', *Aspects*, p. 135.

> And perhaps it could only be done through music. But that is what has lured me on.[102]

Literature cannot speak fully of the world as we experience it, but, if we are to express ideas and concepts, language is crucial. As Burra pointed out, 'he has ideas which need a more distinct articulation than music or abstraction can make' (p. 311). For Forster, personal relationships were of the greatest fundamental significance.[103] He considered them a means of establishing order in the face of the ceaseless flux of daily existence. As Margaret's motto of *Howards End* suggests, it is the connection between conflicting realms – order and chaos, seen and unseen – that comes closest to describing reality.[104] It is the great achievement of Forster's writing, therefore, that his aesthetic realises his central idea, making the process of reading his literature an *experience* of connection. Praising *Jacob's Room*, Forster wrote that 'the method and the matter prove to have been one."[105] The same might be said of his artistic rendering of his double vision.

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[102] *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson & Related Writings*, ed. by Oliver Stallybrass (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 201.
[103] David Ayers identifies Forster's connection of personal relationships with the unseen, writing that, 'friendship acquires a metaphysical frame in the novel which goes beyond, or attempts to suggest a beyond to, the pragmatics of politics and even of individual psychology' (p. 219).
[104] Writing of the supreme significance of relationships to Forster, P. N. Furbank explains that 'for him people mattered, but only relatively, for people are inevitably in a ceaseless state of flux and dissolution; the thing which may contain more reality and permanence is found in *relationships* between people' (author's emphasis, p. 43).
[105] 'The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf', in *Abinger Harvest*, pp. 119 – 129 (p. 123).

Chapter Four:
Virginia Woolf

I

Despite objecting to Forster's 'double vision', dualism is essential to Virginia Woolf's writing. Whilst Woolf is certainly the most abstract of the three authors looked at here, her criticism of the realist traits of Forster's writing oughtn't be mistaken for an outright rejection of a writing style grounded in the familiar, concrete, or the tangible. In his criticism of her writing, Forster (like Woolf writing of him) identifies her 'problem' in binary terms:

> And the problem before her – the problem that she has set herself, and that certainly would inaugurate a new literature if solved – is to retain her own wonderful new method and form, and yet allow her readers to inhabit each character with Victorian thoroughness.[1]

Forster's praise of her aesthetic innovation is tempered by his appeal to this past, perhaps incongruous, tradition. The double vision that he calls for here seems to foreshadow the double vision that Woolf later rejected in his own writing. Woolf's complaint is that 'he has given us an almost photographic picture on one side of the page; on the other he asks us to see the same view transformed and radiant with eternal fires.'[2] The mimetic, tangible quality of the 'photographic' – the 'real' – aspect is equivalent to the 'Victorian thoroughness' Forster wants for Woolf's reader. Whereas the formless, transcendental quality of the 'transformed', irradiated view is akin to Modernist experimentation, and Woolf's 'new method and form'. What Forster wants and what Woolf rejects seem to be the same thing. But despite Woolf's (loaded) use of 'real' in this essay, her writing (fiction or otherwise) does not abandon realism. It would be more accurate to consider the ways in which she redefines, rather than rejects, realism.

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[1] 'The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf', *Abinger Harvest*, pp. 119 – 129 (p. 127).
[2] 'The Novels of E. M. Forster', p. 108.

Woolf doubted her ability to write "real" characters. In 1923, she wrote in her diary that 'people, like Arnold Bennett, say I can't create [...] characters that survive.' 'I daresay its true', she concedes; 'I haven't that "reality" gift. I unsubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness."[3] But as Forster points out in his essay on her a couple of years later, for Woolf, 'human beings are the permanent material of fiction', 'it is only the method of presenting them which changes and ought to change.' The question of whether 'her own characters live', then, is crucial to Woolf's vision.[4] This issue forges the basis of 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.' 'The novel', writes Woolf, 'is a very remarkable machine for the creation of human character [...]. Directly it ceases to create character, its defects alone are visible."[5] The essay specifically rejects the Edwardian 'materialist' literary project, not realism or the Victorian novelists. The challenge facing Georgian writers was closely related to the challenge facing Woolf and, in essence, Forster too. In their various ways, these authors all sought a design to reconcile the antagonistic forces at work in their vision. For Woolf – as with Forster – abstraction supplied a means of achieving this.

As even the title suggests, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' pivots upon various dualisms. The failures of the Edwardian writers, suggested Woolf, resulted from an inability to resolve the conflicting characterisations of the Victorians and the Russians. The 'difficult task' confronting the Georgians depends upon negotiating a dualism (p. 387). Woolf's description of this dualism in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' depends upon the same characteristics that compose Conrad and Forster's double vision. This essay, then, provides an important basis for understanding Woolf's complex appropriation and renegotiation of the double vision.

Victorian fiction is, as ever, aligned with the public, tangible aspect. The 'astonishing vividness and reality of the characters' is achieved, according to Woolf, via a parade of familiar social settings – 'from hall to cottage, from field to slum' –

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[3] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1977 - 84), II (1978), p. 63.
[4] Ibid., p. 127.
[5] Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', 1923, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf 1919 - 1924*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1986 – 94), III (1988), pp. 384 – 389 (p. 384).

and traditions of conduct and institution: 'they love, they joke, they hunt, they marry' (p. 385). Pitted against this, however, is Russian literature, which is aligned with the formless ambiguity of the metaphysical aspect. She writes,

> These are characters without any features at all. We go down into them as we descend into some enormous cavern. Lights swing about; we hear the boom of the sea; it is all dark, terrible, and uncharted (p. 386).[6]

Russian characters are unfathomable; we approach the "heart of darkness" in Woolf's ambiguous approximation of them. Whilst Russian characters are essentially indescribable, Victorian characters are contained in and communicated by a 'keyword' – 'Mr Dick has King Charles's head' (p. 386). Woolf again partakes in the language associated with traditional dualism (the type of dualism that Conrad and Forster subscribed to). The ineffable featurelessness of Russian writing is set against the concrete, exacting articulation of the Victorians.

The Edwardian issues with character derived from an inability to reconcile or surmount the conflict between these dualistically opposed characterisations. Reporting that the 'Victorian version was discredited' by the translation into English of the Russian, Woolf instructs that it was the Edwardian writer's 'duty to destroy all those institutions in the shelter of which character thrives and thickens; and the Russians had shown him – everything or nothing, it was impossible as yet to say which' (p. 386). Her situation of the Victorian character within 'institutions' is apt given the associations of the realist tradition with the public, structured and ordered existence: the world of the Wilcoxes. Whereas the Russians have given 'everything or nothing', in a simultaneously totalising or nullifying effect akin to that which recurs throughout Forster's *A Passage to India*. By destroying the specificities and the structures – the 'keywords' – that stood for character in Victorian literature, the Edwardians sacrifice the particular to the general. It is

[6] Whilst writing the 'Time Passes' section of *To the Lighthouse* in 1925, Woolf explicitly describes an abstract aesthetic as 'featureless': 'I cannot make it out – here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing – […] all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to.' This reinforces my assertion here that Russian fiction can be located within this abstract aspect. I discuss this quotation in depth later in the chapter. Taken from *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1953, ed. by Leonard Woolf (St. Albans, Herts: Triad/ Panther, 1978), p. 92.

this, however, that led Arnold Bennett and his coterie to commit the very crime that he attributes to the Georgians, namely that they fail to create character.

The problem is articulated as the loss of a binary. The particular is given-up to the vague and general: 'institutions' and structures of meaning are 'destroyed', replaced by a shapelessness. The solution – the 'task ahead' – involves maintaining a binary (p. 387). Elsewhere, Woolf argues that certain intellectual developments have destroyed conventional binaries. She observes 'that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken.'[7] Despite the apparent destruction of the aspect that was once the source of order and significance, she reasons that 'some control must still exist – it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create.'[8] In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', Georgian writers are faced with a similar problem: the shapelessness of the Edwardian character lacked the 'conflicts between human beings which alone rouse our strongest emotions' (p. 387). Woolf seeks to reinstate 'conflict', or, in a term reminiscent of Conrad's 'incomprehensible alliances', what she also refers to as the 'incongruously coupled'.[9] It is this dualism which makes characters "real" in the modern era.

Mrs Brown figures Woolf's dualistic urge. As the Victorian character is replaced by the Edwardian, the concrete aspect of the character disintegrates, 'her solidity disappears; her features crumble; the house in which she has lived so long […] topples to the ground.' In its stead, Mrs Brown becomes 'a will-o'-the-wisp, a dancing light': ethereal, formless, and fluid (p. 387). The concrete aspect crumbles, the metaphysical remains. Woolf asserts:

> It is from the ruins and splinters of this tumbled mansion that the Georgian writer must somehow reconstruct a habitable dwelling-place; it is from the gleams and flashes of this flying spirit that he must create solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown (p. 388).

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[7] Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays on the Art of Fiction and the Art of Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 12.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., p. 16.

The Georgians must rebuild the structure that has been lost. Woolf calls for a figure composed of both an abstract, metaphysical quality – 'gleams', 'flashes', a 'flying spirit' – and of a concrete, tangible quality – 'solid, living, flesh-and-blood.'

Forster described *Night and Day* as 'an exercise in classical realism.'[10] It contains 'all that has characterised English fiction, for good and evil, during the last two hundred years.'[11] Considering Woolf's *oeuvre*, one can't deny a certain adherence in some texts to traditions that she, in other (con)texts, condemns. In recent criticism, Pam Morris suggests that 'Woolf does not abandon realism', if, that is, we understand realism 'both as an epistemology and an aesthetic.'[12] Morris refers us to Lukács' claim that realism is 'not photographic; rather, it offers knowledge of social structures and historical processes' (p. 41). If we think of realism as a style of writing that engages with socio-historical concerns, then Woolf criticism of the last few decades provides a significant basis for considering aspects of her writing as realist. Though Woolf, in some of her writing, is by far the most abstract of writers considered here, acknowledgement of her various realist subscriptions and devices is important for understanding the function of abstraction in particular works. Not only that, but contemplating Woolf's realism helps to define my own critical approach and position in relation to the manifold critical responses that have gone before. What Morris calls the 'oscillation of perspective' in Woolf's own discussions of literary styles might also describe the history of critical approaches towards Woolf.[13] Just as abstraction is profitably understood in terms of dualism, so must approaches to reading Woolf navigate between and account for the stylistic variations of her writing.

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[10] Linden Peach, in his essay on 'Virginia Woolf and Realist Aesthetics', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 104 - 117, reinforces this reading of Woolf's earlier literature, adding that some of her books of the 1930's adhere to a realist aesthetic. Similarly, Geoffrey H. Hartman, in 'Virginia's Web', in *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of* 'To the Lighthouse'*: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 70 – 81, writes that that 'there is a line of development that goes from the "realism" of *The Voyage Out* to the expressionism of *Between the Acts*' (p. 78). Considering her *oeuvre*, Woolf can be seen to be 'shuttling between realistic and expressionistic forms of style', but ultimately, for Hartman, she 'never abandoned realism entirely because it corresponds to an early phase of affirmation' (p. 78).

[11] Forster, 'Virginia Woolf', in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, pp. 249 – 265 (p. 253).

[12] Pam Morris, 'Woolf and Realism', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 40 – 51 (p. 40).

[13] Ibid.

II

Contemporaries of Woolf called her an aesthete. F. R. Leavis condemned her writing on the basis of its 'lack of moral interest and interest in action'. Her 'preoccupation with intimating "significance" in fine shades of consciousness'; 'the unremitting play of visual imagery'; and '"beautiful" writing' give, according to Leavis, 'the effect of something closely akin to a sophisticated aestheticism.'[14] Her concentration upon the art of her writing and her neglect of 'the predominant interests of the world', situated Woolf's fiction much more within 'the "bubble of the private consciousness"' than it did the public sphere (p. 100). This departure from the public and retreat into the private is the 'weakness' of Woolf's writing (p. 99).[15]

Instances where Woolf presents a poetic prose in the stead of 'facts' certainly seem to support readings of her as aesthete. Writing in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' of the move in modern prose toward a poetic aesthetic she said, 'it will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail. It will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction' (p. 18). By giving the 'outline rather than the detail', modern writing moves away from concrete, tangible, fact toward a freer, more abstract aesthetic. Woolf discusses her literature in terms similar to Forster's spectrum (ranging from words that function as information, to those that create atmosphere). In another essay, 'How Should One Read a Book?', Woolf presents 'fact' as the nemesis of the novel, writing that 'fact destroys fiction.' 'Moreover', she continues,

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[14] F. R. Leavis, 'After *To the Lighthouse*', in *Twentieth-Century Interpretations*, pp. 99 – 100 (p. 99) (first publ. in *Scrutiny* 10, 1 (June 1941)).

[15] In the same year as Leavis's denunciation of Woolf, Forster similarly observed Woolf's overriding aestheticism. In 'Virginia Woolf' he wrote that '[s]he has all the aesthete's characteristics: selects and manipulates her impressions; is not a great creator of character; enforces patterns on her books; has no great cause at heart' (pp. 251 – 252). Forster defended his friend, however, declaring that she avoids the obvious pitfall – 'the Palace of Art' - for which aesthetes like her risk tumbling into oblivion, too far disconnected are they from the living world around them (p. 251). The pitfall is avoided, he wrote, 'because she liked writing for fun' (p. 252). But his defence of her art seems too colloquial, too whimsical to deflect the likes of Leavis's lambasting.

> however interesting facts may be, they are an inferior form of fiction, and gradually we become impatient of their weakness and diffuseness, of their compromises and evasions, of the slovenly sentences which they make for themselves, and are eager to revive ourselves with the greater intensity and truth of fiction.[16]

Just as Forster concluded, facts, for Woolf, are not the purveyors of 'truth' in fiction. For decades, her poetic aesthetic and writing against 'facts' alienated Woolf from any association with socio-historical concerns. The conventional dualistic model meant that a rejection of the 'information' end of the spectrum equated to a rejection of the public sphere. The (ostensibly) anti-realist bent of her critical and literary writing – the 'lack of moral interest' and (lack of) 'Victorian thoroughness' – then, led many critics to conclude that Woolf was a detached aesthete, too wrapped up in her internalised, amorphous language to engage with her socio-political surround.[17]

But the American feminist revival of Virginia Woolf in the 1970s radically corrected this view.[18] The "discovery" of Woolf as avant-garde feminist happily revised the stale image of her – Anna Snaith summarises – as a 'snobbish, anti-Semitic, elitist writer who wrote badly about things no one cares about', recasting her instead as not only politically and socially aware, but a pioneer of feminist discourse.[19] The other great stimulus to the reinstatement of Woolf in the literary canon was the publication of numerous biographical materials in the 1970s.[20] In her introduction to the *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Snaith warns that 'the effect of this explosion of auto/biographical material on the scope

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[16] Woolf, 'How Should One Read a Book?', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, IV, pp. 388 – 400 (p. 395).
[17] Forster, 'Early Novels', p. 127.
[18] Anna Snaith records in *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000) that 'the invaluable work of feminist literary criticism from the 1970s to the present has brought Woolf firmly back into the "real" world, back to life' (p. 3). Likewise, Beth Rigel Daugherty asserts that 'Woolf, out of favour in the 1950s and the 1960s, was rediscovered by the feminists of the 1970s' in 'Feminist Approaches', *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, ed. by Anna Snaith (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 98 – 124 (p. 101).
[19] *Public and Private*, p. 5. In her introduction to the *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, Snaith also writes that 'by distancing Woolf from her Bloomsbury Group context, American critics in the 1970s allowed the radicalism of her feminism to emerge' (p. 9).
[20] The first biography of Woolf, written by her nephew, Quentin Bell, appeared in 1972. In the same decade, collections of her letters, diaries, and *Moments of Being* were also published for the first time.

of Woolf studies cannot be underestimated' (p. 3). The narrow view of Woolf as aesthete was overwhelmed by a myriad of new critical approaches sparked by the feminist and biographical interests.

Alex Zwerdling's monograph of 1986, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, was one of the first studies to firmly contextualise Woolf's writing.[21] Zwerdling's book established Woolf's 'strong interest in realism, history, and the social matrix.'[22] Paying closer attention to texts like *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and her collections of essays, as well as the (then) recently published diaries and letters, he demonstrated that Woolf was 'very much in touch with the historical forces of her time', listing the most important of these (for Woolf) as 'class and money, the transformation of family life, the women's movement, and peace and war' (p. 31 and p. 26). If we accept Lukács's definition of realism as less to do with a photographic aesthetic, and more to do with social structures and historical processes, then Zwerdling's critical study works to resituate Woolf within this realist, public, 'fact' based sphere.

The majority of criticism has, since Zwerdling and 1970s feminist studies, continued to edify Woolf's writing as historically, sociologically, politically, and ideologically more substantial than a detached aesthete. In this ongoing project of contextualisation, Woolf continues to appeal to an ever-expanding breadth of critical approaches. The 2007 *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, for instance, contains approaches that range from the ideological, historical, political, aesthetic, to the psychological, biographical, and the sexual. It seems extraordinary that one woman and her works could homogenise such an eclectic miscellany of intellectual interest, and it is this that perhaps speaks of her own lack of a fixed centre, or her 'oscillation of perspective', as Morris would say (p. 40). Anna Snaith supports this view, writing that the fact that 'she came at life from so many angles […] facilitates corresponding critical approaches.' And she credits each of these

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[21] In 'Historicising Woolf: Context Studies', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, pp. 3 – 12, Michael H. Whitworth describes Zwerdling's critical study as 'pioneering in its historicisation of Woolf's novels' (p. 8).

[22] Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 15.

approaches as having 'revolutionised the way one might read Woolf.'[23] Recognizing this multiplicity, some critics (including Snaith), have appealed for readers not to limit Woolf to any one approach.[24]

Woolf studies have suffered from limited approaches. In her chapter on 'Modernist Studies' in the *Palgrave* edition, Jane Goldman argues that Modernism's Woolf, 'in its more formalist manifestations, focuses on her stylistic changes, often at the expense of our understanding of the relevance of the cultural and political changes' Woolf cites in her writing.[25] An aesthetic approach is at the expense of a recognition and understanding of Woolf's political engagement. But, contained in the same volume, is the opposite argument. Makiko Minow-Pinkney writes that 'in this surge of assertion of Woolf as a political, feminist thinker, her Modernist aesthetics became an awkward irrelevance.'[26] The socio-political approach is at the cost of engaging with her aesthetic innovations.

Woolf studies of the past few decades reads like a vast project of contextualisation. Goldman's concern, then, is more likely a comment on past practices than present. Minow-Pinkey's, however, is pertinent. The most recent critical edition of approaches to Woolf attests, as its name – *Virginia Woolf in Context* – suggests, to the ongoing concern with situating Woolf in an extensive variety of concurrent discourses, theories, and contexts. The editors of the volume, however, are careful that the socio-political lens is not obscurative of Woolf's aesthetic innovations. Minow-Pinkney's concern, then, succinctly articulates the issue facing Woolfian scholars today: we need to find a

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[23] Introduction to *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, p. 1.
[24] In 'Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 142 – 179, Laura Marcus asserts that she wants 'to change the way we conceive prose discourse so that we do not feel compelled to claim Woolf as a spokesperson for any one group of writers. Virginia Woolf can enter into a variety of literary traditions, for she has no essential nature' (pp. 173 – 4). Likewise, in *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), Patricia Ondek Laurence observes that '[t]he opposing senses of self, reality, presence, being, and language that underlie critical discourses […] attest to the loss of a "centre" in Woolf criticism […]. Woolf critics, now peering with the "fifty pairs of eyes" she longed to see with, should acknowledge their joyous multiplicity' (p. 11).
[25] Jane Goldman, 'Modernist Studies', in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, pp. 35 – 59 (p. 59).
[26] Makiko Minow-Pinkney, 'Psychoanalytic Approaches', in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, pp. 60 - 82 (p. 64).

methodology that accounts for both Woolf's socio-political engagement and her aesthetic innovations. Goldman's (and Bryony Randall's) preface to *Virginia Woolf in Context* is more aligned with Minow-Pinkney's statement than that of Goldman's in the *Palgrave* volume. They write that:

> To historicise and contextualise such aesthetics is no simple matter. Out of this critical practice has emerged a new interest in aesthetics (the so-called new aestheticism). Any endeavour to trace the historical and contextual significances for Woolf must begin from a recognition of this bifurcation in her own writing (p. xi).

In our reading of Woolf today, then, the focus of any methodology needs to support the bifurcation in her own writing between her aesthetic vision and her socio-historical preoccupations. 'We need to allow her to be two things at once', Snaith similarly instructs.[27]

The need for a dualistic critical practice is the logical compliment to the dualistic nature of Woolf's own critical (and literary) writing. Whilst she criticised Forster on the basis of his irreconciled double vision, she celebrates Turgenev's reconciliation of a 'double process.'[28] According to Woolf, Turgenev combined aspects that 'seem incompatible'. She continues:

> Many novelists do the one; many do the other – we have the photograph and the poem. But few combine the fact and the vision; and the rare quality that we find in Turgenev is the result of this double process (p. 57).

Woolf admires his ability to 'balance' contrasts: 'irony and passion; the poetic and the commonplace; a tap drips and a nightingale sings' (p. 57 and p. 56). 'Facts' in the essay become progressively associated with socio-political concerns (aligning them with Lukács's brand of realism). She describes his characters, for instance, as 'profoundly conscious of their relation to things outside themselves', and speaks of their (and Turgenev's) preoccupation with 'the question of Russia', suggesting an awareness of and an engagement with contextual, public issues (p. 58 and p. 59).

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[27] *Public and Private*, p. 6.
[28] Woolf, 'The Novels of Turgenev', in *The Captain's Death Bed & Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), pp. 53 – 60 (p. 56).

Against this 'photograph(ic)' aspect she pits 'the poem', 'intensity', and 'vision', suggesting, as in her essay on Forster, an aesthetic atmosphere more metaphysical than definable. This 'double process' – an equality between contrasting forces – is what Woolf admired in other writers, and desired for her own literary endeavour.[29] Critical approaches to her literature must, therefore, maintain this dualism.

Whilst the value of the contextualisation project for the progression of Woolf studies cannot be overstated, now it is important to recognise the aspects of her writing it has tended to neglect or even obscure. The prioritisation of socio-historical concerns naturally tends to align with only one aspect of Woolf's dualism, that which she might refer to as 'fact'. This has not only been at the cost of a balanced consideration of her aesthetic innovations, but also to the detriment of understanding the 'double vision' of her writing.[30] Consequently, little attention has been paid to the implications of the metaphysical quality of her writing, and her abstraction (and aesthetic) is more often translated and subordinated into socio-historical terms. In 'Historicising Woolf', Whitworth defines historicisation as 'the recognition that something has been lost, that the text needs to be returned to its context in order to be intelligible' (p. 3). In the contextualisation project, the abstract or ambiguous elements of her writing have often been interpreted as the site of 'something [...] lost', as spaces to fill and enigmas to be explained. In *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf*, for instance, Goldman situates the Post-Impressionist, painterly aspects of Woolf's aesthetic – chiaroscuro, colour,

[29] As Pam Morris writes, 'she considers the greatest but most difficult achievement in novelistic prose as that which maintains a perfect balance of the two demands'; 'poetry and prose', 'abstraction and fact, or interpretation and observation, or between vision and life, dream and detail, universal and particular' (p. 42).

[30] In *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), Madeline Moore ostensibly examines the double aspect (the mystical and the political) of Woolf's writing. She does so, however, with such an artillery of biographical and psychological information that she is predominantly concerned with revealing Woolf the person (and, to an extent, the author). She writes, for instance, that 'although Woolf was logical and exacting in her materialist understanding of women's oppression, [...] the power behind her rationality came from affective states which were often experienced as mystical or sexual withdrawals' (p. 24). This contextual nuance deprives any understanding or appreciation of the 'mystical' as essentially metaphysical and ineffable, reducing it, rather, to the manifestation of a psychological state.

and so on – in a feminist theoretical frame.[31] Consequently these, often abstract, elements are decoded as covert references to, say, the suffragette movement. Reading the abstract aesthetic as a codex, as I demonstrated with Conrad and Forster, is unsympathetic to the innovation of an abstract, unconventional mode of communication. By furnishing the abstract visual with a final signified, Goldman's approach ignores something of the multivalency of Woolf's aesthetic. Whilst a feminist nuance has proved – to an extent – a means of preserving the political within the frame of her aesthetics, here it is the subject of the investigation itself which both maintains and addresses Woolf's dualist concerns.[32] By recognising the fundamental ambiguity of certain aspects of Woolf's writing, one can avoid marginalising Woolf's aesthetic for the purpose of establishing her socio-political engagement. A survey of Woolf's own use of the term 'abstract' demonstrates how.

Of the three authors examined here, Woolf is the only one to break with the orthodoxy of the term 'abstract'. Her various usages of the word throughout her diaries, letters, essays, and literature – rather like the critical approaches to reading her – expose a lack of a fixed centre: she subscribes to no singular definition. On numerous occasions – particularly when referring to matters that preoccupied Bloomsbury – she uses it in its more conventional sense (as theoretical rather than actual), connecting it to ideas of beauty, truth, and so on. Writing of the stimulus of being a part of Bloomsbury, she recalls that 'part of the charm of those Thursday evenings was that they were astonishingly abstract. It was not only that Moore's book had set us all discussing philosophy, art, religion;

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[31] Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Similarly, in 'Virginia Woolf and Modernist Aesthetics', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, pp. 35 – 57, Goldman declares that 'chiaroscuro, in Woolf's design has feminist capacity; and I read Woolf's deployment dialectically through a feminist theoretical frame' (p. 50).

[32] In *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), Makiko Minow-Pinkney reads Woolf's Modernist aesthetic as synonymous with feminism, arguing that 'two trends – feminist aesthetic and Modernist aesthetic – are [...] the two faces of a single project' (p. 14). Likewise, in 'Virginia Woolf and Modernist Aesthetics', Goldman's reading of Woolf's aesthetic is bound up with a feminist viewpoint, writing that her 'Modernist aesthetics is caught up in a gender war over the constitution and representation of subjectivity' (p. 43).

it was that the atmosphere […] was abstract in the extreme."[33] And, writing in her diary, she recorded that 'Oliver discussed music. She disapproves of abstract questions in a world where there are so many concrete ones."[34]

In some instances, 'abstract' is set apart from the tangible, concrete aspect, and bears the characteristics of a metaphysical beyond. In *Three Guineas* she writes that the Church of England 'might be supposed to be able to abstract the question from its worldly confusions', thereby suggesting that the abstract is 'other' to the chaotic world of appearances.[35] In this usage, she maintains the binary between the visible world of flux and chaos versus an abstract dimension of order and significance. This is reinforced by her sometime direct association of the term with "truth". In 'How Should One Read a Book?' she writes: '[t]hus the desire grows upon us to have done with half-statements and approximations; to cease from searching out the minute shades of human character, to enjoy the greater abstractness, the purer truth of fiction."[36]

But in addition to her use of 'abstract' in the non-concrete, metaphysical sense, she also uses it to speak of some of her writing. Describing the difficulty of 'Time Passes', for instance, she says:

> I cannot make it out – here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing – I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to; well, I rush at it, and at once scatter out two pages.[37]

In the context of this style of writing, 'abstract' is intended as non-referential. 'Eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to' negates all familiarity, and denies any conventional process of signification. This abstraction is akin to the 'retreat

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[33] Woolf, 'Old Bloomsbury', in *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, 1985), pp. 181 – 201 (pp. 190 - 91).
[34] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II, p. 81.
[35] Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), p. 13.
[36] Woolf, 'How Should One Read a Book?' in *Collected Essays*, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1925, repr. 1966), II, pp. 1 – 11 (p. 6).
[37] *Writer's Diary*, p. 92.

from likeness' in visual culture. 'Is it nonsense, is it brilliance?' Woolf asks.[38] An abstract aesthetic may be too far removed from the familiar to signify anything, or, freed from the limitations of conventional representation, it may penetrate "beyond" to that ineffable "something more". Further on in her diary, musing on what to write next (most likely what became *The Waves*), Woolf clearly aligns poetic form with an abstract aesthetic: 'something abstract poetic next time – I don't know' (p. 128). And discussing *The Moths* (eventually, *The Waves*), she writes '[t]hat was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem. And there may be affectation in being too mystical, too abstract […]' (p. 136). Here, the abstract, poetic aesthetic is aligned with the mystical. Her aesthetic experimentation is bound up with her intellectual preoccupation with how one experiences reality; artistic innovation and contextual, philosophical interests collide. Her aesthetics and metaphysics converge in her concept of abstraction.[39]

An examination of Woolf's more (aesthetically) abstract writing, then, necessarily engages with the philosophical, metaphysical bent of her vision, as well as with her poetic style of prose. The abstract allows the text to be two things at once: engineering a methodology that engages directly with Woolf's 'double process', and a critical approach that negotiates between the need to contextualise and the need to reengage with Woolf's Modernist aesthetic. Crucially, as the situation for both her philosophical preoccupations as well as her aesthetic experimentation, the abstract demonstrates the direct bearing changing concepts of the "real" had upon literary representation.

III

In her biography of Roger Fry, Woolf celebrates his synthesis of 'vision and design.' She writes,

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[38] Ibid., p. 92.

[39] It is also worth noting that here, as with the previous quotation, Woolf hesitates to commit fully to an abstract aesthetic, worrying that one can be 'too abstract', ibid.

> But while every sensation was to be savoured, and none rejected off-hand, a balance seemed to have been arrived at – a balance between the emotions and the intellect, between Vision and Design (p. 245).

Emotion and intellect, vision and design, equates well with the balance Woolf strikes between aesthetics and metaphysics in her abstract concern. It is also this balance which helps to differentiate between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. At its most reduced, Impressionism is concerned with 'vision', whilst Post-Impressionism (eventually abstraction) advances a 'vision', or aesthetic, expressive, not only of a new understanding of "reality", but of a newly conceived metaphysics. In this basic reduction then, Post-Impressionism aims at the balance of emotion and intellect, aesthetics and metaphysics that Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf eventually arrive at.

Woolf's life and writing encourage connections to contemporary visual culture. 'On or about December 1910, human character changed', is perhaps the most quoted of all of Woolf's statements.[40] It is around this date that Roger Fry introduced Post-Impressionism to London – at an exhibition in the Grafton Galleries – and, amongst other inferences, this coincidence of dates has given force to critical analogy between Woolf's work, Fry's theories, and Post-Impressionist painting.[41] But the scope for connection to visual culture is broader than this, and her writing has been (and continues to be) read in relation to innumerable forms of art.

Though the realist quality of some of her writing has (occasionally) been observed, the general trend has been to draw comparison with the artistic movements that broke with conventional, mimetic representation. Some critics focus upon the Impressionism of her writing. In an essay of 1931, William Empson

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[40] Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', A Paper Read to the Heretics, Cambridge, May 18th 1924, in *The Captain's Death Bed*, pp. 90 – 111 (p. 91).

[41] In 'Virginia Woolf and Modernist Aesthetics', Goldman argues that '[h]er focus on 1910 in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' has helped critics, equating 1910 primarily with Post-Impressionism, to forge readings of Woolf's fiction through Fry's aesthetics in particular. And although feminist criticism deflected interest, for a while, to consider other influences, such as the art of Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell […], there is still important work going on in the exploration of Fry's aesthetics' (p. 32).

identified her 'Impressionistic method' as a flaw.[42] Criticising 'Kew Gardens', he argued that this method – 'the attempt to convey directly your own attitude to things, how you connect one thing with another' – is at the cost of plot (p. 448). Empson mused 'how much safer one would feel', had there been a 'system' or formal structure to crystallise the 'metaphysical conceit, poured out so lavishly' in her array of 'glittering and searching' images (p. 449). He observed that she focuses upon 'sensations rather than the impulses that make sensations interesting', reiterating the link between her aesthetic and Impressionism (p. 448). For others, Impressionism is not sufficient for speaking of all her aesthetic experiments and developments. Stella McNichol writes 'Impressionism as a term fails to do justice to the three novels of her central phase. Her art in these works is more characteristically post-Impressionistic.'[43]

Recent surveys like *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* celebrate the sheer plurality of Woolf's relation to the arts. In this text, chapters are concerned with everything from her literary aesthetic – Victorian, Modernist, Bloomsbury – to her lifestyle aesthetic – fashion, domestic, bohemian, gardens – to cultural interests – film, photography, music, and dance – to name but a few. Others have, in the past, subscribed to the current trend for preserving the breadth of Woolf's engagement with the arts. Marianna Torgovnick recognises the prevalence of various artistic influences in her vision, writing that 'her deepest, most basic sense of art was […] twentieth-century art, rooted in the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists and advancing eagerly into Cubism, abstraction and other innovations.'[44] Whilst Torgovnick succeeds in demonstrating that Woolf's writing does (at least) 'two things at once' – Impressionism and Post-Impressionism – she tends to ignore the differences between the two aesthetics, conflating them in her observations of their shared

[42] William Empson, 'Virginia Woolf', 1931, in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. and introd. by John Haffenden (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), pp. 443 – 449 (p. 448).
[43] Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 93.
[44] Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 62.

qualities.[45] In his retrospect, Fry records that his designation of 'Post-Impressionist' to the exhibition of 1910 was too emphatic of a 'divorce from the parent stock' (Impressionism), acquiescing that 'I see now more clearly their affiliation with it.' That being said, he affirms that he was 'none the less right in recognising their essential difference, a difference which the subsequent development of Cubism has rendered more evident.'[46] A similar distinction is helpful for distinguishing Woolf's abstraction from her Impressionism.

The 'essential difference' is one of 'structural design.' Impressionism innovated 'the modern vision' with its 'more scientific evaluation of colour' and departure from imitative representation.[47] But their surrender to sensation was, for Fry, an abandonment of 'the ideas of formal design' (p. 203). It was Cézanne who worked out 'how to use the modern vision with the constructive design of the old masters' (p. 202). Whilst Impressionism posited a vision, then, for Fry, it was Post-Impressionism that incorporated that vision with design.[48] This is not to say, however, that Impressionism is without design. Whilst its free and feathery brushwork might seem to some like an abandonment of form in favour of texture, their paintings are not composition-less. They have design, but theirs is less concerned with planes and delineation, and more concerned with the distribution of light and colour around the canvas. The so-called 'design' that abstraction

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[45] Writing, for instance, of the influence of visual culture on *The Waves*, Torgovnick says that '[t]he idea of a *series* of perspectives on the same scene or objects was a favourite of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists […]. In Woolf's literary equivalent, the prologues to *The Waves*, light also plays a transforming role' (p. 131).

[46] Fry, 'Retrospect', in *Vision and Design*, pp. 199 – 211 (p. 203).

[47] Ibid., p. 201.

[48] It is important to acknowledge that speaking of Impressionism as a coherent movement is problematic. As Richard Brettell observed in *Modern Art, 1851 – 1929: Capitalism and Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), within Impressionism, there are two identifiably separate contingents: those who subscribe to Mediated Impressionism, and those of a Transparent Impressionism. Mediated Impressionism is dominated by figure painters like Degas, and tends to conceive of visual reality 'not as a vibrant colour field, but as a social world in which the figure and its various "grounds" must be analysed to be understood'. This type of Impressionism tends to be characterised by elaborate compositions with many elements. Transparent Impressionism dwells mostly upon landscapes and urban views, led by the likes of Monet and Renoir. For this branch of Impressionists, the composition is 'less important than 'colour and surface unity' (p. 18). 'The eye is fetishized rather than the reality described' (p. 17). In a discussion of an Impressionism preoccupied with vision then (as with here), it is Transparent Impressionism and its feitishization of the eye that we are referencing, rather than Mediated Impressionism.

incorporated into the Impressionist vision, was a sense of 'something more'. In addition to rendering sensational experience, they communicated an additional dimension. Anthony Uhlmann explains:

> Whereas the "sensation" of the Impressionists relates to the appearance of things, Cézanne […] brings the appearances, or sensations offered by external nature, into dialogue with the internal nature of the artist; that is, the painter is no longer all "eye" as with the Impressionists, but now also mind, an organising mind, which orders these external sensations with recourse to its own internal sensations: a sense of form apparent in the answering motifs and perceived harmony of nature.[49]

For Clive Bell, Cézanne's ability to create 'forms that would express the emotion that he felt for what he had learnt to see' bridged the Impressionist's "eye" with the artist's mind.[50] Bell continues: 'it was in what he saw that he discovered a sublime architecture haunted by that Universal which informs every Particular' (p. 210). From his vision – 'what he saw' – Cézanne contrived a means of expressing 'aesthetic emotion' (p. 45). Bell calls that expression 'significant form'. Fry shares Bell's belief that significant form is the unique and crucial accomplishment of Post-Impressionism. A work that possesses significant form, is, for Fry, 'the outcome of an endeavour to express an idea rather than to create a pleasing object."[51] Elsewhere, Fry describes the 'idea' in even more abstract, metaphysical terms. In his essay on 'The French Post-Impressionists', Fry argues that their unique 'pictorial language' is an attempt to express 'certain spiritual experiences.'[52] 'These artists', he continues, 'aim not at illusion but at reality' (p. 167). In a chapter titled 'The Metaphysical Hypothesis', Bell discusses the 'latent reality of material things', describing 'the cause of that strange emotion' – significant form – as 'that which lies behind the appearance of all things – […] the ultimate reality.'[53] And, in her own description of the aims of Post-Impressionists, Woolf confirmed

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[49] Anthony Uhlmann, 'Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury Aesthetics', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, pp. 58 - 73 (p. 66).
[50] Clive Bell, *Art*, 1914, ed. by J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949 edn, repr. 1987), p. 208.
[51] 'Retrospect', p. 211.
[52] 'The French Post-Impressionists', *Vision and Design*, (pp. 166 – 170) p. 166.
[53] Ibid., pp. 69 – 70.

that 'they were trying to penetrate beneath appearance to reality.'[54] A dualistic discourse – of internal and external, vision and design, aesthetics and metaphysics – is what helps to distinguish Post-Impressionism from Impressionism.

A couple of critics have related the doubling of Woolf's aesthetics to metaphysics.[55] Ann Banfield weds Woolf's philosophical influences with those of visual art. 'It is Fry', she writes, 'who provides the link between Cambridge philosophy and visual art and aesthetics.'[56] Hermione Lee makes a similar claim, stating that 'the antithesis in "Modern Fiction" between representational scenes and amorphous shapes bears a striking resemblance to Roger Fry's theories of art.'[57] Woolf's essay on 'Modern Fiction' depends, like so much of her literary criticism, upon dualisms. In this essay, she rejects 'materialism' and yearns for a sense of the metaphysical.

Woolf's 'materialists' equate to the Wilcox type. Bennett is accused of making a 'book so well constructed and solid in its craftsmanship that it is difficult for the most exacting of critics to see through what chink or crevice decay can creep in.'[58] Wells's crime lies in his overriding concern with 'the work which ought to have been discharged by Government officials'; 'ideas and facts'; and 'institutions and ideals'. The materialists 'write of unimportant things'; 'they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring' (p. 159). The literary conventions they cling to are as superficial as the systems that impose order and significance upon the public,

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[54] *Fry*, p. 174.

[55] A survey of the critical analysis of Woolf's relation to philosophers and philosophy reveals a lack of consensus. In 'The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf', in *English Literature and British* Philosophy, ed. and introd. by S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 316 – 356, Rosenbaum finds the root of Woolf's philosophical influence (in her later works, at least) in G. E. Moore, asserting that 'Moore's *Principia Ethica* became the epistemological as well as the ethical basis for her mature art' (p. 356). Banfield contends this, however, writing that 'Woolf and Fry choose a more Russellian than Moorean emphasis' (p. 359). In 'Virginia Woolf and Our Knowledge of the External World', in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38, 1 (1979), 5 - 14, Jaakko Hintikka writes that though the direct influence of Russell on Woolf is difficult to prove, her knowledge of Plato provided 'an indirect influence which is very real indeed' (p. 12). Citing Woolf, who once said 'I don't want a "philosophy" in the least', Jesse Matz's approach (in *Literary Impressionism*) cautiously maintains an ambiguity, as he argues that Woolf's refusal of a philosophy 'reflects an elected inconsistency that must disallow philosophical classification' (p. 175).

[56] *The Phantom Table*, p. 11.

[57] Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 15.

[58] Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', 1925, *Essays*, ed. by. Andrew McNeillie, IV, pp. 157 – 165 (p. 158).

external aspect. Pitted against the character of the materialists is a yearning for their opposite: the metaphysical. Against their corporeality, for instance, she craves the 'spirit' (p. 158). Mr Bennett, she muses, has perhaps 'come down […] just an inch or two on the wrong side' (p. 159). In this language of 'sides' – the body versus the spirit; the material versus the metaphysical – Woolf urges us toward the metaphysical.

The metaphysical is difficult for Woolf to define in any exacting terms. Having earlier referred to it as the 'spirit', she later calls "it" 'life', adding, though, that 'it is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this' (p. 159). Both Fry and Bell write of the difficulty of defining significant form in similar terms. Fry writes: 'I seem unable at present to get beyond this vague adumbration of the nature of significant form.'[59] Similarly, Bell tells us to 'call it by what name you will, the thing that I am talking about is that which lies behind the appearance of all things – that which gives to all things their individual significance, the thing in itself, the ultimate reality.'[60] Isolating it simply as 'the thing we seek', Woolf preserves ambiguity, assigning it various shifting terms like 'life or spirit, truth or reality', and 'the essential thing'. Writing of the conventional form that novels take – providing plot, 'comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability' – Woolf asks, 'is life like this? Must novels be like this?'. The "design" aspect of her "vision" then, owes no fidelity to conventional form, only to conveying 'the myriad impressions' that the mind receives everyday. Here is where Woolf's brand of dualism becomes apparent. She rejects the conventions and customs promoted by materialist writing, maintaining that the flux and formlessness of daily experience – the 'incessant shower of innumerable atoms' – ought to be the source of the artist's vision (p. 160). It is the duty of the "design" to convey how those impressions are received, experienced, and felt by the mind. The unique mechanism of an individual's consciousness comprises one aspect of Woolf's double vision; the 'innumerable atoms', the 'myriad impressions' comprise the other.

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[59] 'Retrospect', p. 211.
[60] *Art*, p. 69.

Ann Banfield describes the urge in both philosophy and art to maintain dualism. Speaking of Fry's 'dualistic' theory – '"vision" and "design", Impressionism and Post-Impressionism' – Banfield declares that 'it is the product of a thinking which also gave rise to Moore's, Russell's and Whitehead's persisting dualism in which "the world of universals" coexists with "the world of existence"' (p. 13). In 'Art and Life', Fry draws the connection between religious decline and science's affirmation of materialism with developments in art. He observes that as 'the scientific attitude is more widely accepted', the 'protests of organised religion and of various mysticisms seem to grow gradually weaker and to carry less weight.'[61] The traditional receptacles of the spiritual – religion and mysticism – have crumbled, and in their stead, modern art is advanced (in Fry and Woolf's theories) as the purveyor of something akin to the spiritual.[62] Fry writes that '[t]he general conception of life in the mid-nineteenth century ruled out art as noxious, or at best, a useless frivolity.' The impact of scientific discovery on conceptions of life, however, lead Fry to 'suppose that the scientific man of today would be much more ready to admit not only the necessity but the great importance of aesthetic feeling for the spiritual existence of man' (p. 10). Banfield is careful to point out, however, that, unlike Russell's, Fry's double vision is more closely aligned with science than it is mysticism.[63] As such, it hangs on to a certain empiricism, avoiding the total abstraction that Bell encouraged.[64] Banfield writes that 'Fry's and Woolf's aesthetic, in its commitment to knowledge and realism, incorporate empirical truth'. It is this synthesis of the metaphysical and the empirical – or, in Banfield's terms, 'not then purely formal', nor 'purely aesthetic' character – that

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[61] 'Art and Life', *Vision and Design*, pp. 1 – 12 (p. 9).
[62] Woolf writes in 'Modern Fiction' that '[i]n contrast to those whom we have called materialists, Mr Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards [...] these signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see' (p. 161).
[63] Banfield writes that 'Fry wished to align art with science, and not, as [...] Russell does, make it a form of mysticism' (p. 250).
[64] Describing Bell's theory presented in *Art*, Fry writes that 'he declared that representation of nature was entirely irrelevant to this and that a picture might be completely non-representative.' To this, Fry responds: 'this last view seemed to me always to go too far since any, even the slightest suggestion, of a third dimension in a picture must be due to some element of representation', in 'Retrospect' (p. 206).

Woolf's double vision is akin to that of Post-Impressionism. 'The Post-Impressionist contemplation of forms', Banfield tells us, 'must continuously re-establish contact with the objects of acquaintance' (p. 377). Bell writes that 'it was because Cézanne could come at reality only through what he saw that he never invented purely abstract forms' (p. 210). With this quotation and Woolf's loyalty to empiricism in mind, (not to mention her personal interest in the pioneer of Post-Impressionism), it is no wonder that many critics have remarked upon the similarities between Woolf's aesthetic and Cézanne's.

Observing the same dualism as Banfield, Jesse Matz offers an alternative reading. In an examination of the double focus in 'Modern Novels' on the 'material and essential', 'empirical and ideal', Matz argues that this is not indicative of Post-Impressionism. It ought, rather, be regarded as Impressionism (p. 178). Like Banfield, Matz identifies in Woolf's writing a prevalence of both the empirical and the essential, daily experience and life itself. 'What Woolf wanted', says Matz, 'was some right combination of the two – some way to have the kind of life that resides in material detail, but yet to make it a part of some more essential vision; some way to have essential insight, but yet stay grounded in material life' (p. 174). A negotiation between these two aspects leads Woolf, in some ways, to pioneer a liberated aesthetic, but, in others, to adhere to the conventions of the materialist aesthetic:

> When ranging freely means finding good middle ground between essence and existence – between the life of the spirit and the life of the body – Woolf's voice sounds on in delight, but when ranging freely means that consciousness can slide into brute materiality or utterly lose its ground, Woolf trades freedom for stability, even if it means borrowing it from sources out of sympathy with modern fiction (p. 178).

The 'impression', according to Matz, has the power to 'encompass essence and experience' (p. 180). Thus the dual quality – the combination of the '"ordinary waking Arnold Bennett life" with "life itself"' – is thought of by Matz as Impressionist (p. 179).

Matz argues that the 'critical indecision' in 'Modern Novels' is indicative of Woolf's Impressionistic tendency (p. 178). The selection of 'Modern Novels', the 1919 version of Woolf's revised essay of 1925, 'Modern Fiction', is significant for a discussion of Impressionism over Post-Impressionism. The two differ in a number of subtle, but fundamental, ways. A reading of the differences exposes a certain development in Woolf's thinking; crucially, the 'critical indecision' of the first essay has been replaced by the assured argument and tone of the second. It would undoubtedly be harder for Matz to locate his definition of Impressionism in the essay of 1925.

The 1919 essay, 'Modern Novels', is hesitant in its convictions. Statements are littered with qualifications; assertions are tempered. Here she ventures tentatively – 'we seem to see ourselves on the flat' – whereas in 'Modern Fiction' she asserts boldly – 'on the flat, in the crowd, half-blind with dust.'[65] 'Is it not perhaps the chief task of the novelist' politely suggests the first; 'is it not the task', is the rhetorical demand of the second (p. 31 and p. 160). Criticism of the materialists is amplified in the second essay. The politely measured tone of her first essay is replaced by the confident lambasting of the second.[66] The second adopts the tone of a manifesto.[67] This essay (of 1925) has hardened the ideas ventured in 1919. It is more confident, forthright, definite. Whilst the subject of indecision still troubles Woolf in the later essay, it lacks the indecisive, hesitant tone of the earlier, undermining Matz's basis for Impressionism.

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[65] 'Modern Novels', 1919, *Essays*, III, pp. 30 – 37 (p. 31); 'Modern Fiction', p. 157.

[66] For instance, it is enough, in 'Modern Novels', to simply name the materialists once. In her second reference to the three authors in this earlier essay, Woolf refers to them merely in the innocuous collective: 'the former' (p. 31). Their crimes as individuals, however, are reiterated in 'Modern Fiction' in her repeated reference to 'Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy', with the adage that they had 'shown us what they might have done but have not done', a sentence which doesn't appear in the first essay (p. 158). Mr Bennett is demoted from 'Creator' to 'creator', and the following damnation is added: 'they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring' (p. 159).

[67] It replaces, for example, the general – 'this [discontent]' (p. 32); 'but suggesting' (p. 33) – with the personal – 'our discontent' (p. 159); 'we are suggesting' (p. 161). The 'powerful and unscrupulous tyrant', inserted in the second as the symbol of oppression of convention, adds to the melodramatic rhetoric and increasingly revolutionary spirit of Woolf's diatribe (p. 160).

It is true that, for both versions, vagueness is an issue. But whilst the first can be seen to suffer from it, the second grapples with it head on. The following quotation, for instance, gives example for the first:

> No perception comes amiss; every good quality whether of the mind or spirit is drawn upon and used and turned by the magic of art to something little or large, but endlessly different, everlastingly new (p. 36).

Woolf settles for a romantic, if not simply "wishy-washy" indefinitude, speaking wistfully of the 'magic of art', indiscriminate between 'mind or spirit', 'little or large.' Here, the 'indecision' that Matz speaks of is perfectly apparent. Woolf defers to the intangible, ineffable to avoid any rigid definition for the type of freedom she imagines for the modern novelists. The second essay deletes this sentence.[68] Here, instead of finding refuge in vagueness of expression, the indefinability of the 'thing we seek' becomes a concern. In 'Modern Fiction' (unlike 'Modern Novels'), Woolf troubles over an attempt to isolate that ineffable "something" that is missing from the materialist book. I refer again to the quotation cited, in part, earlier:

> It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this […]. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide (p. 159).

In the earlier essay, Woolf was comfortable with referring simply to 'the essential thing', using an amorphous or ill-defined language as a convenient articulation of freedom and a contrast to material convention (p. 32). Here, however, she is directly concerned with the nature of 'the thing we seek'. She is careful not to reduce it to any one definition, and instead circles round it with various evasive

[68] The original sentence appears only marginally: '[…] every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss' (p. 164).

terms. Though she is still arguing for indecision, then, here, she argues for it more decisively.

The new concern with the quality of 'the thing we seek' demonstrates (albeit subtly) a significant shift in the essay of 1925. Whilst the earlier essay negotiated between a measured derision of materialism/ convention and the need for a vaguely adumbrated freedom, the later unabashedly rejects the former, and concentrates more on formulating the terms of the latter. The metaphysical features are no longer simply a convenient means of conveying the freedom required for communicating 'the essential thing.' 'The essential thing' that modern fiction strives after is explicitly associated with metaphysical as well as aesthetic concerns. As Woolf remarks, 'we scarcely better the matter' of definition 'by speaking, as critics are prone to do, of reality'.[69] The 1925 version of the essay is more conscientious and more anxious about its conception and location of "reality" and the "real." Taking the place of the 'critical indecision' that Matz identifies in the earlier essay – between materialism and Modernism; "ordinary waking Arnold Bennett life" and "life itself" – is a preoccupation with the indeterminacy of the "real", the 'essential thing'.

An Impressionist reading can't fully accommodate the shift of focus that takes place in the 1925 version of the essay. Matz describes the aspiration to Impressionism in Woolf's writing in terms of a 'mediation' between 'essence' and 'experience'. The navigation between the two is a process 'steady and slipping, [of] holding and letting go' (p. 182). Woolf achieves this aesthetic by 'attributing material force to thought, and figuring its object as a liquid solidity'. It is a 'style of perception unfettered by habits of distinction' (p. 184). The former description is reminiscent of Conrad's conflation of irreconcilable antagonisms: the Impressionist mediation accounts for the negotiation between two apparently irreconcilable aspects in Woolf's aesthetic. But the Impressionist bent of this mediation is too preoccupied with the phenomenological drive of her aesthetic to take the metaphysical, mystical preoccupations of Woolf's most abstract literature into full account. As with Conrad, a reading of Woolf's double vision in terms of

[69] 'Modern Fiction', pp. 159 – 60.

its abstract quality allows for simultaneous engagement with both her aesthetic and her philosophical vision.

Crucially, the comparison between the earlier and later versions of this essay stresses the importance of reading Woolf's ideas and aesthetic as ever evolving. Whilst Matz's Impressionist lens is appropriate for interpreting the double aspect of 'Modern Novels' and Woolf's thinking of 1919, her thinking in 1925 demands a revised approach. Two of her most (critically and popularly) revered novels of her middle period – *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* – are, as the author herself proclaims, abstract in preoccupation and aesthetic. A reading of these two texts in terms of their abstract qualities will demonstrate that, for these texts at least, this approach is best suited for understanding the co-dependence of Woolf's vision and design, aesthetics and metaphysics.

IV

To the Lighthouse shares the concerns expressed in 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.' The artist in the novel, Lily Briscoe, confronts the same issues that the modern author faces.[70] Contemplating 'the problem of space', Lily idealises what her painting ought to be:

> Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses.[71]

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[70] Various critics have observed the connection between Lily Briscoe the painter and Virginia Woolf the writer. In her chapter 'Where the Spear Plants Grew: the Ramsay's Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*', in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane Marcus (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), pp. 148 – 169, Jane Lilienfield says that '[r]eaders have long known what is now certain, that Lily Briscoe is an artistic surrogate for the author, and that Lily's formal task is analogous to Woolf's' (p. 165). Similarly, in his chapter on 'Bloomsbury', in *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 1 – 28, Andrew McNeillie writes that 'Lily Briscoe stands at her easel as the surrogate author' (p. 18).

[71] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1927, introds. by Eavan Boland and Maud Ellmann (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 163.

The familiar dualism apparent in Conrad and Forster's writing also shapes the vision of *To the Lighthouse*, characterised by the concrete versus the intangible, the articulate versus the ineffable. The incongruous alliance between the intangibility of the 'feathery, evanescent', 'bright' surface and the bolted 'iron' structure beneath recalls the 'gleams and flashes of this flying spirit', required for creating 'the solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown.'[72] Lily's painting and Woolf's novel share the same endeavour: they aim to suffuse the tangible object with 'the essential thing'; the material 'body' with the 'spirit.'[73] Whilst Woolf maintains the character of Conrad and Forster's dualism, however, she resituates these oppositional characteristics in new contexts. For Conrad and Forster, the aspect that was metaphysical in quality – ineffable, dark, abstract – tended to be situated 'beyond' perception and therefore extra to one's consciousness. For Woolf, however, the evasive thing, or 'spirit' – whether captured by Lily's painting or the fleeting experience of a character – is what she calls a 'moment of being', and is therefore utterly rooted in individual perception and consciousness. Conrad and Forster invoke the metaphysical to effect a sort of expansion beyond the limitations of language, suggesting that this dimension is, in a sense, beyond the capabilities of their art. By resituating the metaphysical within consciousness, however, Woolf posits it not as an ineffable extension away from the text, but as the ultimate artistic achievement. As she concludes in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', 'Mrs Brown will not always escape. One of these days Mrs Brown will be caught' (p. 388).

Binary opposites are prevalent throughout *To the Lighthouse*. The three 'long steady stroke[s]' that emit from novel's central image – the Lighthouse – illustrate the absolute segregation of light and dark which carries throughout the novel's imagery (p. 58). Light and Dark helps to establish another of the novel's important binaries: between Mr and Mrs Ramsay. As they both contemplate the Lighthouse, Mr Ramsay reflects that 'he had lost his temper over the Lighthouse. He looked into the hedge, into its intricacy, its darkness' (p. 60). Immediately

[72] 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', p. 388.
[73] 'Modern Fiction', p. 160 and p. 158.

after, Mrs Ramsay fixes her gaze on the light of the Lighthouse: 'one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight. […] She saw the light again' (p. 60). United and divided by the same object – the Lighthouse – Mr Ramsay contemplates in its dark intervals, Mrs Ramsay in its light.

In some ways, Mr and Mrs Ramsay are reminiscent of Forster's antagonists – the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels – in *Howards End*. The couple's characteristics are undoubtedly opposed, but the ways in which these oppositions differ from Forster's oppositional characterisation are telling of the nature of Woolf's abstract vision. The Wilcoxes and Schlegels are representative of the public and private realms, respectively. Whilst the one adheres to fact and ordered systems, the other celebrates feeling, and intangible, abstract reflection. Mrs Ramsay flies 'in the face of facts', whilst Mr Ramsay pursues 'truth with such an astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings' (p. 29). In this way, then, they are comparable to Forster's antagonists. But Woolf's association of *both* Mr and Mrs Ramsay with abstract preoccupations prevents direct transposition of Forster's dyad onto Woolf's.[74] Mr Ramsay is dubbed (by Charles Tansley at least) 'the greatest metaphysician of all time', whilst Mrs Ramsay is the embodiment of beauty (p. 35). Both are a source of 'truth': Mr Ramsay 'was incapable of untruth', whilst James feels that Mrs Ramsay 'alone spoke the truth' (p. 4 and p. 178). We can no longer say – as we could with Forster – that one character is representative of the concrete, public sphere and the other, of the metaphysical, abstract sphere. As consciousness takes centre stage as the locus of 'the essential thing' the conventional binary is relocated. For Forster and Conrad this sphere is used to speak of the limitations of language, and it becomes a means of getting beyond those limitations. Their location of the metaphysical as "out there", beyond the bounds of common perception, tethers their dualism to association with Western

[74] In 'The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf', Rosenbaum observes the opposition of Mr and Mrs Ramsay, writing that the couple 'can be viewed as embodying not only the masculine and feminine principles but also reason and intuition, analysis and synthesis, farsightedness and nearsightedness, thought and action, truth and beauty, perhaps even realism and idealism in some sense or other.' But, despite all of these antagonistic traits, Rosenbaum cannot help but add that 'the Ramsays are individuals as well as a couple, and each has the capacity to lose his personality in something outside himself' (p. 340).

philosophical and theological dualistic traditions. Despite her use of words like 'spirit' and 'mysticism' to refer to 'the essential thing', Woolf's relocation of it from "out there" to within consciousness secularises it, further distancing it from traditional conceptions of dualism. As Mark Hussey observes, 'there is a sense in Woolf's work (the work of an avowed atheist) of an immanent beyond.' This 'abstract "reality"', however, 'is not bound by the spatiotemporal horizons of actual human life, but is distinguished from mysticism by its rootedness in lived experience.'[75] The rooting of 'the essential thing' within the frame of 'lived experience', then, places a new emphasis upon the individual.

Woolf's writing – fiction and non-fiction – frequently questions art's ability to convey actuality. Whilst writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf records in her diary a visit to Thomas Hardy. Matters of representation were evidently at the fore of her mind as she records: 'I was telling myself the story of our visit to the Hardys, and I began to compose it; that is to say to dwell on Mrs Hardy leaning on the table, looking out, apathetically, vaguely, and so would soon bring everything into harmony with that as the dominant theme. But the actual event was different.'[76] With the assumption that 'art is based on thought', Woolf wonders what the 'transmuting process' is. She imagines that the 'greatest book in the world' would be made entirely and exclusively with 'the integrity of' the author's thoughts. 'Suppose one could catch them before they became "works of art", she muses. 'Catch them hot and sudden as they rise in the mind.' But the thoughts must be translated into words, 'the process of language is slow and deluding' (p. 98). The transmutation of the artist's thought into art, then, is Woolf's version of dualism. Her concern with the conversion of thoughts to words, consciousness to art, reimagines the metaphysical/ concrete binary within this new, individualistic context.

To the Lighthouse is deeply concerned with reconciling these dualisms. Characters are regularly hampered by an inability to express themselves, to word their thoughts, to speak in any essential way of others. As an artist, Lily most of

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[75] Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (n.p.: Ohio State Press, 1986), p. 97.
[76] *Writer's Diary*, p. 98.

all, finds herself caught between thought and expression. Whilst staying with the Ramsays in the first section of the novel, she is 'made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time; that's what you feel, was one; that's what I feel was the other, and then they fought in her mind' (p. 95). Lily is figured as a mediator. McNichol describes Lily's middling position as an artist, and in relation to the Ramsays:

> Lily, trying to understand Mrs Ramsay, and ultimately expressing through the medium of art the "reality" of the novel, continually oscillates between resistance to the Ramsay's influence and inability to do anything other than succumb to it. It is between those two positions that she negotiates the meaning inherent in the quality of life of a particular family in a particular house by the sea on a late September afternoon shortly before the outbreak of the Great War (p. 98).

But McNichol misses the conflict inherent in the role of Woolf's artist: between the artist's metaphysical thought and their translation of that thought into the concrete word or image.

Lily confronts this issue early in the novel. She regards the scene she plans to paint:

> She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her [...] and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child (pp. 17 – 18).

Lily struggles to render her vision – 'this is what I see' – in a concrete design. 'One could not say what one meant', she says (p. 18). Lily's concern is also Woolf's, as the author records her difficulty in writing *To the Lighthouse*: 'what image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none, I think.' 'Life', she adds, is 'the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. [...] But by writing I don't reach anything.'[77] But in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf develops a strategy for expressing the apparently inexpressible, for realising metaphysical thought via a

[77] *Writer's Diary*, p. 104.

concrete articulation. Given the relocation of 'the thing we seek' to consciousness, one of the overriding concerns of the narrative is how to speak of self. In the novel, other individuals experience the same issue that faces Lily and Woolf: translating one aspect (the metaphysical) into another (the concrete).[78] The characters' strategy for capturing and crystallising a sense of themselves is enactive of Woolf's own process of realising her vision in a design.

Peter Burra remarked upon Woolf's ability to translate 'an inarticulate idea into an image' (p. 316). In their attempt to fix a sense of self, Woolf's characters anchor themselves to an object or image. When he finally encounters the Lighthouse – 'a stark tower on a bare rock' – James is satisfied to find that 'it confirmed some obscure feeling of his about his own character' (p. 193). This recalls his mother's experience of the Lighthouse in the first section of the novel. As she contemplates the quanta of light emitting from the Lighthouse, she aligns herself with the third stroke, 'which was her stroke':

> one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw […]. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example (p. 58).

In these instances, the characters' perception of an image – 'the thing she looked at' – becomes something to which they can attach an idea of their own being. Objects provide order in the face of flux. Seeking clarity after the 'chatter and emotion' of dinner, Mrs Ramsay 'used the branches of the elm trees outside to help her to stabilise her position. Her world was changing: they were still. The event had given her a sense of movement. All must be in order' (p. 105).' The oppositional pairings - 'changing' and 'still'; 'movement' and 'order' – emphatically maintain a dualism, cementing the association of Mrs Ramsay's consciousness with the intangible, and the object with the concrete. James is again aligned with his

[78] Woolf frequently aligns the problem of the artist with matters of self expression, saying, for instance, that 'one can't write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes; but look at the ceiling, at Grizzle [her dog], at the cheaper beasts in the Zoo which are exposed to walkers in Regents Park, and the soul slips in.' In *Writer's Diary*, p. 89.

mother when, in the final section, he too seeks 'an image to cool and detach and round off his feeling in a concrete shape' (p. 176).

In a diary entry of 1929, Woolf asks 'is life very solid or shifting? I am haunted', she continues, 'by the two contradictions. This has gone on forever; will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world – this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous.'[79] Whilst the everyday life of a person is stream-like there are 'moments' which anchor something essential. Woolf calls these 'moments of being'.[80] Certain images and objects in *To the Lighthouse* crystallise moments, snatching them from the continuity of flux and time. Whilst writing this novel, Woolf expressed a certain fascination with the abstracting power of an isolate object. She wrote,

> I am now and then haunted by some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident – say the fall of a flower – might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist – nor time either.[81]

The 'fall of a flower' is charged with the whole mystical profundity of a woman's being. Though the image is familiar and tangible, what it 'contain[s]' is the opposite. The concentration of this metaphysical essence into the concrete is a process of abstraction; the 'incident', or 'moment', is outside of time, and 'practically does not exist'. In 'Modern Fiction', Woolf instructs that we 'not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small' (p. 161). The charged objects of *To the Lighthouse* demonstrate the signifying potential of the small and mundane.

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[79] Ibid., p. 140.
[80] Woolf discusses the concept of 'non-being' and 'moments of being' in one of her memoirs, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, pp. 61 – 159. Moments of being are, according to Woolf, 'exceptional moments' (p. 71) embedded in non-being, which she describes as being the parts of the day 'not lived consciously' (p. 70). When they occur, these moments of being are experienced by Woolf as 'shocks': 'I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not […] simply a blow hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words' (p. 72).
[81] *Writer's Diary*, p. 105.

Serving Mr Bankes one more piece of the boeuf en daube, Mrs Ramsay experiences a 'moment of being'. It gives her the sense that:

> there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby […]. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain (p. 97).

As with her charged objects, the 'moment' is characterised by the familiar dualism. It is a momentary abstraction from the ordinary continuum ('the flowing, the fleeting'). Against the intangibility ('the spectral') of daily life, it is ordered, hardened ('like a ruby'), anchored ('a stability'), eternal. The force and significance of Woolf's charged objects and 'moments of being' depend upon a dualistic contrast: between the metaphysical evanescence of daily life (or 'non-being' as Woolf calls it in 'Sketch'), and the solid, immutable abstraction.

In 'Solid Objects', a short story written in 1918, we see the beginnings of Woolf's experimentation with the abstracting power of the object. Against an amorphous, inexact background, the solid object becomes the perfect embodiment of both abstract aesthetic and abstract meditation: 'so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore.'[82] Each object of the story is defamiliarised, no longer recognisable in any referential sense. The glass has been so worn by the sea 'that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass' (p. 97). The remarkably shaped china 'looked like a creature from another world', and the 'massy', 'globular', piece of iron 'was evidently alien to the earth' (p. 99 and p. 100). As his kleptomania for these abstract objects grows, the protagonist is further removed from everyday existence.[83] Despite this disconnect, his retreat into the abstract seems somehow profound. His companion's trivialisation of the solid objects in the last line –

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[82] 'Solid Objects', 1920, in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), pp. 96 – 101 (p. 97).

[83] 'His career – that is his political career – was a thing of the past. People gave up visiting him. He was too silent to be worth asking to dinner. He never talked to anyone about his serious ambitions; their lack of understanding was apparent in their behaviour' (p. 100).

'pretty stones', he calls them – works to cement this inarticulate profundity, and we are left with a sense that John has penetrated beneath the surface of things. In this short story, abstract form is used to get to something more essential than daily occupation and experience. Significantly, Woolf is careful not to fix abstract form to any one image. She draws a distinct contrast 'between the china so vivid and alert, and the glass so mute and contemplative' (p. 99). Unlike Clive Bell, Fry was less prescriptive with regards to form. In response to Bell's assertion that 'representation of nature was entirely irrelevant to this and that a picture might be completely non-representative', Fry feels that here, Bell has gone 'too far'. The point is not simply that form should be abstract, but that 'the artist is free to choose any degree of representational accuracy which suits the expression of his feeling.'[84] This sounds remarkably like Kandinsky, who writes that the artist is free to 'use any form which his expression demands; for his inner impulse must find suitable expression.'[85] Along with certain proponents of abstraction in visual culture, then, Woolf promotes abstract form not as a new form to displace the old, but as a means of freeing the artist from prescribed form altogether. Kandinsky and Fry stress that form must follow artistic vision: the 'inner impulse' or 'feeling'.

In 'Solid Objects', Woolf engineers a relationship between abstract thought and abstract aesthetics. For the story's protagonist, John, the lump of glass served as a 'natural stopping place for the young man's eyes when they wandered from his book',

> Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it (p. 98).

The solid object converges with consciousness. As thought is attached to the object, the form of the object is further abstracted – 'it loses its actual form' – and becomes 'an ideal shape' – a composite of abstract thought and abstract image. Abstract images become a crucial means of realising the vision of the artist.

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[84] 'Retrospect', pp. 206 – 207.
[85] *Concerning the Spiritual*, p. 69.

To the Lighthouse is not just structured on the basis of dualisms, it also depends upon various triads.[86] Jean Alexander neatly summarises the novel's various tripartite structures:

> The major structural triad is the division into sections, "The Window", "Time Passes", and "The Lighthouse", written in three distinct styles reflecting three psychological realities and revealing three conceptions of nature. The second triad [...] is that of Mrs Ramsay, Mr Ramsay, and Lily Briscoe. The final triad in terms of the resolution of social forms is that of father, son, and daughter sailing to the Lighthouse.[87]

The novel is organised geometrically. Its structure traces abstract shapes. Even in the broadest sense, then, Woolf opts to communicate her vision with an abstract design.

These abstract shapes appear as crucial images in the narrative, the most significant of which is the triangle. Mrs Ramsay is most associated with the triangle. Speaking of the urge to 'be herself, by herself', she reflects that:

> All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk [...] to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others (p. 57 and p. 58).

Her essential self – 'having shed its attachments'– is expressed by an image that is both abstract shape and abstract concept (p. 58). Dualism helps again here, giving a sense of what is meant by this essential, abstracted self. Everyday experience and essential being are spoken of in terms of limitation and limitlessness; surface and depth; the visible and the invisible; transient and eternal. 'When life sank down for a moment', we are told, 'the range of experience seemed limitless'; 'beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by.' As a 'wedge of darkness', Mrs Ramsay experiences 'a freedom', 'a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability'

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[86] Following his analysis of the dualisms in *To the Lighthouse*, S. P. Rosenbaum adds that 'for all its dualisms, *To the Lighthouse* is also a novel of triads' (p. 341).
[87] Jean Alexander, *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974), pp. 110 – 111.

(p. 58). In this abstract state, described by this abstract image, Mrs Ramsay experiences the same freedom and stability that Woolf accords a representation freed from conventional constraint.

The image of Mrs Ramsay as a 'wedge of darkness' is complemented by Lily's attempt to translate her vision of the person into the design of her painting. In her first attempt, Mrs Ramsay (reading to James) is represented by a 'triangular purple shape'. Lily has made 'no attempt at likeness', her reason for conveying her so was as a contrast to the bright corner of her composition: 'she felt the need of darkness' (p. 48 and p. 49). Lily figures her composition in dualist terms. It was a question of 'lights and shadows', and 'how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left' (p. 49). Mrs Ramsay is realised by Lily as an abstract image and aligned with the characteristics of the abstract dimension. This initial abstract representation gathers force and significance with Mrs Ramsay's representation of her essence as a 'wedge of darkness'. Lily returns to this abstract image in her completion of the painting towards the end of the novel.

In the last section of the novel, Lily is narrated at the point of conflict between various binaries: absence and presence, unreality and reality, idea and image. She finds herself unable to translate her thought into words or image, 'one could say nothing to nobody' (p. 169). The events of 'Time Passes', the deaths, the Great War, and the loss of Lily's subject – Mrs Ramsay – are narrated in the final section as absences. Emptiness, meaninglessness, inexpression all speak of the impact of these events. 'What does it mean? How do you explain it all?' Lily repeatedly asks. The abstract anchors of the first section are nowhere to be found here, as 'the whole world seemed to have dissolved […] into a pool of thought.' Lily seeks stability, solidity, articulation: '"you" and "I" and "she" pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint' (p. 170). There is a sense that if she could only concentrate her thought into word, or translate her vision into an image, then absence might be summoned into existence, and sense, meaning, might be restored to being. Lily feels that if she (and Mr Carmichael) were to 'demand an explanation', as two 'human beings from whom nothing should be hid might speak', then,

> beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough Mrs Ramsay would return. "Mrs Ramsay!" she said aloud, "Mrs Ramsay!" (p. 171).

Mrs Ramsay becomes an abstraction, a figure to draw the metaphysical into concrete, tangible form. The artist's and author's concerns are aligned again here, as Mrs Ramsay is expressed both in plastic form – 'shape' – and verbal – "Mrs Ramsay!".[88] Like Woolf's charged objects or the painter's abstraction of form, the pronouncement of her name evokes both a presence and an absence. In her final attempt at realising her vision, an anonymous figure casts 'an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. It altered the composition a little.' Lily finds it 'interesting', 'useful' (p. 191). The dark triangle recalls Lily's first attempt at representing Mrs Ramsay but, now a shadow, it is refigured in accord with her absence. In addition, then, to rendering vision in tangible form, the abstract figure performs another function in this final section. The spectre of Mrs Ramsay, the triangular shadow, speaks of loss, and in doing so, supplies a strategy for filling the emptiness.

Whilst Peter Burra argues that Forster avoided total abstraction because of his need to express ideas, in 'Time Passes' abstraction becomes a means of obliquely communicating some of the novel's major contextual issues. Woolf was against dogma. After the abstraction of *The Waves*, *The Pargiters* (later *The Years*, 1937) was to express the 'external'. 'There's a good deal of gold', Woolf reflects while writing it, to be found 'in externality."[89] In this essay-novel, she seeks to combine 'facts, as well as the vision'; 'The Waves going on simultaneously with Night and Day."[90] This serves as a reminder that, despite the abstract poetics of some of her texts, Woolf's *oeuvre* disallows any suggestion that she abandoned realism (particularly if we take realism to be defined as socio-political engagement). Though in many ways an antidote to the challenges of *The Waves*, *The Pargiters*

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[88] In a later reference to the spectral vision of Mrs Ramsay the visual and verbal are again associated: 'the sight, the phrase, had its power to console' (p. 172).
[89] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV, p. 133.
[90] Ibid., pp. 151 – 2.

presented its own difficulties. In her diary, Woolf speaks of 'difficulty of something I wont call propaganda.' She continues: 'I have a horror of the Aldous novel: that must be avoided.' 'Ideas', she added, 'are sticky things: wont coalesce; hold up the creative, subconscious faculty' (*sic.*).[91] Similarly, at an earlier stage of writing this novel she wants to present 'millions of ideas but no preaching.'[92] Even in a novel intended to be an overt presentation and exploration of 'facts' – 'history, politics, feminism, art, literature' – Woolf is adamant that these ideas ought not harden into the propagandistic, dogmatic, preaching of the likes of Huxley. As Woolf studies of the last few decades has convincingly argued, novels like *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* do, despite their abandonment of a typically realist (materialist) aesthetic, engage with contextual socio-political concerns. Abstraction provides a means of obliquely presenting these 'ideas' and 'facts' in a method that doesn't compromise her aesthetic vision. Not only that, but it proves a method that implicitly guards against dogma, propaganda, and preaching and, instead, uses significant form as a means of *generating* the response and emotion of an individual, instead of imposing it.

'Time Passes' is certainly the 'most abstract' section of *To the Lighthouse*, but it is also the section most laden with significant narrative and socio-historical events. Included in her parenthetical presentation of various characters' deaths is that of Andrew, which composes one of the very few – and certainly the only really direct – references to the Great War:

> [A shell exploded. Twenty or Thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsey, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous] (p. 127).

The brevity and clarity of the information reads like a telegram; no more is said than is essential.[93] The only concession to humanity is her inclusion of

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[91] Ibid., p. 281.
[92] Ibid., p. 152.
[93] Or, as Roger Poole has argued in "'We All Put Up with you Virginia": Irreceivable Wisdom about War', in *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, ed. and introd. by Mark Hussey (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), pp. 79 - 100, the parentheses are similar in form to field service postcards. He writes that 'the effect of telling the later history of the Ramsay

'mercifully', which, isolated by two commas from the rest of the syntax, nudges towards emotion, but errs on the side of restraint. 'Mercifully' tinges the information with colloquialism; the tone shifts from the didactic to the familiar; from a wholly objective perspective to something more local. The voice narrating this event remains essentially anonymous: possibly familiar, possibly formal. The presentation of this crucial historical and narrative event as stark, succinct, in square parenthesis, isolates and abstracts it from the main body of the passage. In some ways, these parentheses are the verbal figurings of Mrs Ramsay's shadow. They speak of loss, absence, and – as parenthetical – are shadows in the light of the main narrative of the section. In his analysis of 'Time Passes', James M. Haule observes how Woolf's 'narrowing [of] the stream of her words' increases 'their force.'[94] The less Woolf says of these devastating events, the more opportunity she creates for individual responses. Haule argues that 'Time Passes' was written 'in direct opposition to the "historians' histories" that so annoyed her in 1919.' Her abstraction of major contextual issues – like the war – might have, in the past, led certain critics to assume that these novels were apolitical. Now, however, we can read this oblique handling as a means of separating her own voice, her own view from these issues. As Haule writes, 'it is now not Woolf's view' (p. 177). Significant form is a means of generating individual (reader) responses. Abstraction generates emotion.

V

Unity is essential to the artist's vision in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily's composition is a matter of 'how to connect this mass on the right hand with that

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family in a series of parentheses may owe something of its effectiveness to the new formalisation and banalisation of subjective reality that was introduced and made officially receivable by the Field Service Postcard' (p. 84).

[94] James M. Haule, '*To the Lighthouse* and the Great War: The Evidence of Virginia Woolf's Revisions of 'Time Passes', in *Virginia Woolf and War*, pp. 164 – 179 (p. 177).

on the left', but the 'danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken' (p. 49 and p. 50). The loss of the characters - 'Mrs Ramsay dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too' – is experienced by Lily as a loss of unity. It was 'as if the link that usually bound things together had been cut, and they floated up here, down there, off, anyhow.' The disunity renders all 'aimless', 'chaotic', 'unreal' (p. 140). The realisation of her vision depends on fixing upon certain (abstract) images, 'but how to bring them together?' Lily asks (p. 141). The same issue faces the author.[95] The kaleidoscopic perspective, the fluid transmission between various individual consciousnesses, is crucial to the vision of the novel. To truly realise her vision, the artist must find a means of bringing the parts together to compose a whole. Mrs Ramsay is the primary unifying force for both painter and writer. The dinner party of the first section gathers the novel's individuals around a single table: '[t]hey all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her' (p. 78).[96] In a foreshadowing of the impact of her death, as Mrs Ramsay leaves the party, 'a sort of disintegration set in; they wavered about, went different ways' (p. 104). The disintegration is not only a crisis of loss, it tells of the contemporary crisis of representation. Ann Banfield argues that the modern crisis of English thought was a matter of unity. 'The new aesthetic', she says, 'is also a problem of unity.' It 'atomises the novelistic world, thereby creating the problem of "how the whole is held together" which traditional narrative form is inadequate to solve' (p. 247).

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[95] Richard Pearce writes in *The Politics of Narration: James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) that 'there is good reason to see Woolf as trying to achieve unity in the fragmented world of her novels' (p. 136). Similarly, Stella McNichol writes of *To the Lighthouse* that 'at all levels of the novel […] the fragments cohere to form a unity, a whole' (p. 109).

[96] Bertrand Russell uses a table in *Problems of Philosophy*, 1912 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1998, repr. 2001) to illustrate the impact of different perspectives upon a single image. 'If several people are looking at the table at the same moment', Russell writes, 'no two of them will see exactly the same point of view, and any change in the point of view makes some change in the way the light is reflected.' The subjectivity of perception is especially relevant to the artist: 'the painter has to unlearn the habit of thinking that things seem to have the colour which common sense says they "really" have, and to learn the habit of seeing things as they appear' (p. 2). The connection between the metaphysician and the artist is also made in *To the Lighthouse*, when Andrew uses the table to explain his father's philosophical metaphysics to Lily. Consequently, 'whenever she "thought of his work" she always saw clearly before her a large kitchen table' (p. 21). The table, then, references the concerns of the metaphysician as well as those of the artist, drawing them together in one image.

The fragmentary perspectives that compose Woolf's vision make the quest for a unifying form central to her artistic concern. Mrs Ramsay's ability to bring 'together this and that and then this' suggests that Woolf thinks of abstraction as a means of unification (p. 153).

Remembering a day they had all gone to the beach, Lily sees Mrs Ramsay and experiences the following 'revelation':

> This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs Ramsay saying "Life stand still here"; Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent […] – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing […] was struck into stability (p. 154).

Mrs Ramsay crystallises the moment, drawing the parts of Lily's vision of the past – 'herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave' – into a coherent composition, like a work of art. The process of abstraction – the shaping of chaos into stability – is also one of unification, a bringing together.

Woolf described 'Time Passes' as 'the most difficult abstract piece of writing – I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to.'[97] Void of characters and of perspectives, this section requires a means of unification other than Mrs Ramsay. To convey the passing of time in the most abstract, most universal of ways, Woolf must find a means of writing about the material without writing from the viewpoint of consciousness. She does this, in part, via her depiction of the passing seasons as fluid, almost metaphysical. They are in want of some anchor: 'some crystal of intensity', 'single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which would render the possessor secure' (p. 126). Something static and tangible is wanted to oppose the formless flux. The images Woolf turns to here are indicative of a strategy she develops in *The Waves* for juxtaposing abstract formlessness and concrete articulation. These images envelop the particular: 'cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within' (p. 126). Two conflicting aspects are complicated, as

[97] *Writer's Diary*, p. 92.

external image expresses the abstract, unformulated vision. These images envelop like 'an invisible elastic net', providing an atmosphere metaphysical in quality, but unifying in effect.[98] Here, the primary function of the 'invisible elastic net' is to convey the passing of time in the absence of consciousness. In *The Waves* it becomes the essential unifying force in Woolf's most ambitious abstract piece of writing.

VI

Woolf insisted upon the abstract quality of *The Waves*. In her diary, she repeatedly describes both her vision and the writing as 'abstract' and details little more than its pervasive ambiguity.[99] Echoing her concept for 'Time Passes', she wrote that it was 'to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem.'[100] In her vague, transcendental conception of *The Waves*, Woolf makes it clear that she has abandoned the 'fact' end of Forster's spectrum of writing in favour of a poetry-prose, a style that is 'abstract poetic.'[101] Even after publication, she fixates upon the inaccessibility of the writing, remarking that 'this unintelligible book is better "received" than any of them [...], how odd that people can read that difficult grinding stuff!'[102] Critics agree that this is an abstract novel. Geoffrey Hartman writes that 'in the case of *The Waves* we cannot even tell what happens', 'everything is interpolation, even the characters who are simply their speeches, and these speeches interpret acts that might and might not have been' (p. 79). For Pearce, the featurelessness of the novel demands an apophatic summary. He writes: '*The Waves* has no storyline', 'no narrator, no description of the characters

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[98] A shower of impressions all 'danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvellously controlled in an invisible elastic net – danced up and down in Lily's mind' (p. 23).
[99] In one early vision of *The Moths* (later, *The Waves*), Woolf outlines her ideas in the following abstract, ambiguous terms: 'But who is she? I am very anxious that she should have no name. I don't want a Lavinia or a Penelope: I want "she". Also I shall do away with exact place and time. Anything might be out of the window – a ship – a desert – London.' In *Writer's Diary*, p. 142.
[100] Ibid., p. 136.
[101] Ibid., p. 128. Compared to her experience of writing *The Waves*, her essay-novel *The Pargiters* (that later became *The Years*) provided a welcome tonic, dealing primarily with 'fact' and 'externality', as opposed to the abstractions of that other novel. 'But oh how easy this writing is compared with *The Waves*!' she recorded in *Writer's Diary*, p. 185.
[102] Ibid., p. 171.

or the setting, no summaries of the action, no commentary – only dialogue with minimal attribution' (p. 156). Hermione Lee declares it 'more devoted to abstraction than any of the other novels.'[103] And Julia Briggs argues that in this novel, abstraction became Woolf's means of closing 'her eyes to the accumulated objects and circumstances with which the Edwardian novelists had overloaded their writings.'[104] The style, then, is assuredly anti-conventional. But reading the style of *The Waves* as an abandonment of the materialist tradition is to dwell only superficially on this abstract writing. To confront the novel's abstraction, we ought to account for both its abstract aesthetic and its abstract vision, or, in other words, the relationship between Woolf's stylistic innovations and her philosophical and metaphysical preoccupations. Read in this multi-dimensional way, we can appreciate Woolf's artistic innovation as a meditation upon the nature of reality, and an articulation of the way we perceive it.

Woolf speaks of *The Waves* in a language that flies between concrete design and fleeting vision. She expects the novel will be 'very sharply cornered', but this is at odds with the 'sudden fertility' and 'fluency' of her writing. 'In old days', she observed, 'books were so many sentences absolutely struck with an axe out of crystal: and now my mind is so impatient, so quick, in some ways so desperate.'[105] She finds herself 'more & more attracted by looseness, freedom', saying that she is 'writing The Waves to a rhythm not to a plot.'[106] But she also stresses the novel's solidity, describing it as 'inspissate', 'compact.'[107] Writing again against the 'appalling narrative business of the realist', Woolf observes that the 'waste, deadness', and 'unreal[ity]' of their prose comes from 'the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment.' With the composition of *The Waves* in mind, Woolf celebrates poetry as a means of achieving simplification and selection, but also a means of saturation. 'The poets', she said, succeed 'by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything

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[103] *Novels of Woolf*, p. 159.
[104] Julia Briggs, 'The Novels of the 1930s and the Impact of History', in *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 70 – 88 (p. 73).
[105] *Writer's Diary*, p. 141.
[106] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV, p. 316.
[107] *Writer's Diary*, p. 169.

in: yet to saturate.' Her conflation of simplification and saturation seems contradictory. 'It must include nonsense, fact, sorditity: but made transparent', she writes, apparently cementing her poetic vision as conflicted, a confusion of almost nothing and nearly everything.[108] But Woolf's use of abstraction in the novel resolves this conflict. Simple images are saturated with accrued, expanding significance. The invisible and visible collide in the enveloping atmosphere of the interludes. Boundaries between individuals are elided in the seamless shifts between voices; the kaleidoscopic perspective is both fragmentary and singular. Abstraction in *The Waves* draws opposites and disparate parts of the novel together.[109]

The interludes structure an abstract, unifying frame. In her composition of the novel, Woolf worried about 'how to pull it together, how to comport it – press it in to one.' The interludes help accomplish this. They are 'essential', not only 'to bridge' but also 'to give a background – the sea; insensitive nature – .'[110] They describe the dawn, passing, and fading of a day. The natural and inanimate images that compose them alter in accordance with the day, effecting a gradual but constant flux within a continuum. Though situated entirely within the bounds of perception and temporality, the interludes are infused with mysticism. The visible and invisible converge, particularly in the images of the sky and the waves. In the first paragraph and the dawn of the day, darkness fades, slowly distinguishing form,

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[108] Ibid., p. 138.

[109] Various critics have observed the unifying drive of *The Waves*, and its negotiation between and conflation of binaries. They tend not, however, to connect this observation with abstraction, positioning the focus, rather, upon the dualisms themselves. Anna Snaith, for instance, in *Public and Private*, writes of the novel that 'in terms of style, this is the closest Woolf comes to a union of public and private, although, importantly, it is not a synthesis or a replacing of one voice by another, but a combination of two separate, distinctive voices' (p. 65). In *The Problem of Subject*, Minow-Pinkney regards the 'impossible dialectic' of Bernard's simultaneous 'thanking and cursing the gaze of the other' as 'the existential reality of androgyny' (p. 185). For Moore (in *The Mystical and Political*), the 'alternation between unity and separation describes the very process of individualisation itself' (p. 128). Taking this dual conflict as a 'social statement', again, the focus is on the dualism itself, and not its abstract rendering or vision. In *Poetry of Fiction*, McNichol observes that the 'polarities of order and chaos' that govern the novel constitute the 'abstract concept' at 'the heart of *The Waves*' (p. 130). Abstraction, here, however, only refers to 'concept', and not to the aesthetic design of the novel. Though McNichol identifies certain images as symbolically reconciling these dualisms, 'the complete globe or ring of existence' for instance, she does not connect this to an abstract aesthetic, their designation as symbols limiting their potential for significance.

[110] *Writer's Diary*, p. 151.

'the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.'[111] The 'cloth' and the 'strokes' are overt in their allusion to painting. Conveyed thus, as a painting, we see the image as something visible and referential. But, paradoxically, the images of these interludes can be read as abstract as well as referential. As in Conrad, the indeterminacy of the sky and the sea, lend themselves to conveying a sense of eternity, an abstract surround.[112] In this paradox, the painting becomes the frame. Each 'thick stroke' is separate, individual, but seamlessly connected and a part of the 'grey cloth' of the sea. This image allows for simultaneous individuality and contingency. The perpetuity of the rolling waves, endlessly 'pursuing each other', establishes an eternal immutable rhythm that structures the basic pattern and form of the text. That rhythm is effected both by the perpetual rise and fall of the waves, as well as their iteration throughout the interludes and within the major narrative. Aspects of the interludes seep into the major narrative, maintaining and reminding one of the fundamental rhythm: of separation and connection between the visible and invisible. The voices iterate an awareness of the surrounding abstract interludes throughout the narrative: '"Birds are singing up and down and in and out and all round us", said Susan'; 'I hear nothing', says Bernard, '[t]hat is only the murmur of the waves in the air' (p. 7 and p. 12). It figures the 'invisible elastic net' that surrounds the 'shower of impressions', images, and entities of the novel. It is an image that orders and reconciles. Woolf records that she avoided using the images of the interludes as 'set pieces', envisaging them instead 'simply as images, never making them work out; only suggest. Thus I hope to have kept the sound of the sea and the birds, dawn and garden subconsciously present, doing their work underground.'[113] It is difficult to read the images of the interludes in any definite symbolic way, and, as Woolf here suggests, their ambiguity is key to their abstract function within the text. They act in relief

[111] Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 5.
[112] McNichol confirms that 'Woolf's sense of the mystery of the universe and the complexity of human existence is bound up with her feelings for the sea' (p. 117).
[113] *Writer's Diary*, p. 166.

to the voices of the text, working, like the 'grey cloth' of the sea, as a means of containing the particular within a unity, in an abstract surround.

When she reflects in her diary upon the locus and nature of the "real", Woolf (like Conrad) often situates it in the natural surround. Walking back through Russell Square one evening, she sees 'the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; and the moon' and experiences 'a great and astonishing sense of something there, which is "it".'[114] Similarly, in 1928 she perceives:

> a thing before me: something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist. Reality I call it.[115]

Given the association of the sky with the essential – "it" – ought we then take the natural surround in *The Waves* as "reality?"[116] The "real" is not, however, so easily located in the complex vision of this book. Woolf blurs the distinction between real and unreal when she says of *The Waves* that: 'the unreal world must be round all this – the phantom waves. […] Could one not get the waves to be heard all through?' And, a couple of lines later, she asserts that 'there must be great freedom from "reality."' In the same breath, however, she says 'well all this is of course the "real" life; and nothingness comes only in the absence of this."[117] Initially, the phantom waves, the abstract rhythm that sounds throughout, is deemed unreal, a foil, perhaps for the reality of consciousness. And yet 'all this' – all that can be and has been stated – has, by its very utterance, been made something rather than nothing.[118] In *The Waves*, then, the distinction between the real and the unreal, like so many other binary opposites in Woolf, is

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[114] Ibid., p. 90.
[115] Ibid., p. 132.
[116] Certain critics claim this. McNichol writes that 'greater reality' is 'represented in the Interludes of the novel and is embodied in the waves' (p. 139). And, describing them as the 'purple prefaces', Hartman writes that they 'alone […] seem to be founded in reality, or rather Nature', (p. 79).
[117] Ibid., p. 143.
[118] There are echoes, here, of both Ludwig Wittgenstein's opening and closing statements to *Tractatus*, where he asserts that: 'The world is everything that is the case'; and 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.' In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922, introd. by Bertrand Russell, trans. by C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1998), p. 31 and p. 189.

complicated and confounded. Woolf's concept of non-being and moments of being provides an analogy for understanding the relation of the 'unreal', abstract 'phantom waves' to the conscious reality of the voices. Non-being is described by Woolf as the part of the day 'not lived consciously'. Moments of being are 'embedded in many more moments of non-being.'[119] In these exceptional moments a sense of the 'real thing behind appearances', something immutable and everlasting, is experienced. Yet they are embedded in mundane existence. Non-being is not unreal; it is the backdrop to daily existence against which the moments charged with a greater sense of reality irradiate from. The interludes, particularly the waves, can be read as Woolf's non-being. They 'give a background', they contain the voices.[120]

In his summing-up, Bernard illustrates the relationship between the abstract surround and the voices:

> half-way through dinner, we felt enlarge itself round us the huge blackness of what is outside us, of what we are not. The wind, the rush of wheels became the roar of time, and we rushed – where? And who were we? We were extinguished for a moment, went out like sparks in burnt paper and the blackness roared (p. 196).

'What we are not' describes the 'non-being' of the abstract surround. The individual is obliterated by what they 'are not', by a formless, enveloping abstraction. To summon himself back from this 'huge blackness', Bernard 'strike[s] the table with a spoon', disrupting the indefinitude of oblivion with a definite object and a definite action (p. 196). He asserts something solid against the abstraction. This passage has its counterpart in their meeting at Hampton Court. As silence descends upon the group, their 'separate drops are distinguished', Louis tells us, 'we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness.' Neville describes it as 'an illimitable chaos', a 'formless imbecility', and Bernard, as 'that streaming darkness in my eyes', images 'set against the whirling abysses of infinite space' (p. 160 and p. 161). Against this abstraction, 'what do we

[119] 'Sketch', p. 70.
[120] *Writer's Diary*, p. 151.

oppose', Bernard asks, 'how can we do battle against this flood; what has permanence?' (p. 161). The voices seek something concrete to attach themselves to, to render themselves tangible, permanent, against the surrounding formlessness. For Jinny, triumph 'over the abysses of space' is achieved 'with rouge, with powder, with flimsy pocket-handkerchiefs'; superficialities connecting her to the material world. Susan finds stability through literal, physical connection – 'I grasp, I hold fast […] I hold firmly to this hand' (p. 162). For Bernard, the recollection of a unifying image from an earlier scene – 'the flower' made up of their lives – again concentrates the voices into a single vision, impressing them as one against the illimitable backdrop:

> a many sided-substance cut out of this dark; a many-faceted flower. Let us stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made. Let it blaze against the yew trees. One life. There. It is over. Gone out (p. 162).

For a moment, all are united and held by a tangible image; they are made concrete and illuminated against an abstract surround.

Ann Banfield's discussion of the 'unreal' aspects of *To the Lighthouse* – the reality beyond perception – provides a significant model for reading the abstract surround of the later novel. Banfield speaks of an 'omnipresent, eternal element surrounding all things.' This surround simultaneously divides perspectives and links them. Describing it as a 'form-giving surrounding space', Banfield explains that 'it invisibly imparts form, constructing the "scaffolding" to give rigidity and permanence to the fleeting event.' It is the 'fluidity without' that provides a basis and relief for the form concentrated within: 'what lacks form is what creates form' (p. 128). The fluidity and formlessness of the surrounding oblivion – the impinging darkness, the perpetual waves – provides an abstract backdrop against which the novel's images radiate as concrete, as buoys to attach oneself to in the flux and chaos of existence.

The voices envision themselves as suspended in a stream, the formlessness and flux of which challenges their grasp of themselves. Contemplating the futility of life-writing, Woolf sees herself 'as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place;

but [unable to] describe the stream.'[121] Here, Woolf asserts the abstract quality of the stream (it contains but is itself indescribable), and illustrates the power of the formless surround over the individual. Like the waves, the stream is another manifestation of Woolf's abstract surround. In his summing-up, Bernard speaks of 'the incomprehensible nature of this our life' (p. 189). In their quest for self definition, the voices try to make sense of the 'incomprehensible nature' of their existence. The image of the stream establishes a significant dualism central to the struggle for self in the novel: between being fixed and unfixed. Describing themselves as suspended in a 'stream', the voices veer between an unattached, indistinguishable state – 'unmoored from private being' –and attachment to something tangible, an image or a structure which anchors a sense of themselves (p. 82). Each voice develops a different strategy for 'battl[ing] against the flood', for finding a state of permanence (p. 161). The diversity of their methods plays a part in distinguishing them from one another, developing the individuality of each.

VII

Louis' sense of detachment – 'I hang suspended without attachments […] I have no firm ground to which I go' – derives from his foreignness, the feeling that he is an outsider (p. 47). Subscription to the public life provides a sense of order in the face of flux, as well as with a sense of belonging. 'This is life', he says, 'Mr Prentice at four; Mr Eyres at four-thirty' (p. 120). The punctuated Wilcoxian existence of appointments and routine, duty and commerce anchor Louis. 'If I do not […] ask Mrs Johnson as I pass through the office about the movies and take my cup of tea and accept also my favourite biscuit, then I shall fall like snow and be wasted' (p. 121). Without the structured public existence, Louis fears disintegration and obliteration of self. One of his refrains becomes 'I will reduce you to order', and he later reflects that 'my destiny has been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads' (p. 168 and p. 144). Order, then, imposes a defence against 'the darkness', and

[121] 'Sketch', p. 80.

provides a means of collecting the disparate elements together into single, coherent structure (p. 160). Rhoda is unable to find a strategy for asserting her self against the flux. She is 'unsealed', a 'porous body', she 'flutter[s] unattached, without anchorage anywhere', defenceless against the stream which pours through her, 'opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free' (p. 41, p. 87, and p. 41). At one point Rhoda comes to a puddle, 'I could not cross it', she says, '[i]dentity failed me. […] I was blown like a feather, I was wafted down tunnels' (p. 46). This corresponds to one of Woolf's own experiences. She writes:

> There was the moment of the puddle in the path; […] everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something…the whole world became unreal.[122]

Unable to cross the puddle, Woolf is overwhelmed by a sense of the 'unreal.' If we relate Woolf's experience to Rhoda's, we see Rhoda as condemned to the abstract surround, unable to escape from an interminable state of non-being. Louis refers to her 'intense abstraction' and 'unseeing eyes' (p. 143). Whilst his refrain is the iteration and imposition of order, Rhoda repeats: 'I have no face.' No concrete attribution distinguishes her; she is abstract. She finds nothing to connect to: no object, no person, no ordered structure. She addresses the others as 'you who live wholly, indivisibly', envying their ability to fix themselves to something singular, 'an end in view – one person […] to sit beside, an idea' (p. 94 and p. 93). For her 'there is no single scent, no single body […] to follow' (p. 93). Rhoda craves unity, solidity, singularity. As with many of the ambiguous images and motifs of the earlier part of the novel, her encounter with the puddle is returned to and developed later. Faced with the puddle again, Rhoda feels that 'unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely?' (p. 113). Rhoda appeals to an object, a literal physicality, to draw her from her own abstraction.[123] In another

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[122] 'Sketch', p. 78.

[123] Earlier in the novel a chest of drawers is appealed to for the same purpose: '[l]ook, there is the chest of drawers. Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they

instance she perceives that the others, by contrast, 'stand embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together' (p. 158). In each of these passages, Rhoda draws attention to two significant ways the voices set themselves against the abstract surround: by attaching themselves to images, and embedding themselves in significant events, or moments. It is Bernard, however, who supplies the most comprehensive survey and examination of the setting of form against formlessness.

For Bernard, solidity is essential. 'I require the concrete in everything', he proclaims, 'I never wish to prolong these states of detachment' (p. 50 and p. 132). Storytelling, 'making phrases', is his strategy against oblivion. 'A good phrase', has for Bernard 'an independent existence' (p. 50). Phrases, for him, are abstractions rendered concrete. Looking back, he sees himself walking along the Strand, 'immersed' in the stream, saying '"That's the phrase I want", as some beautiful, fabulous phantom bird, fish, or cloud with fiery edges swam up to enclose once and for all some notion haunting me' (p. 181). A phrase or image has the power to contain some unformulated thought, to render the phantasmagoric notion tangible. 'Making phrases' is Bernard's method of making sense, of reconciling disparate elements, of negotiating between opposites. 'It is the perpetual warfare', he says, 'it is the shattering and piecing together – this is the daily battle':

> The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself to a dancing light. I netted them under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words (p. 191).

Bernard's phrase imposes 'order', it draws together the 'scattered' elements of his vision, 'netting them under', rendering them concrete.[124] But an element of metaphysicality is maintained and incorporated in the 'dancing light' of the translucent leaves. Bernard's description of 'making phrases' as 'perpetual warfare'

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sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned, I am tumbled; I am stretched, among […] these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing' (p. 20).

[124] Parallels might be drawn here to Woolf's own utilisation of writing as a strategy for dealing with the forces that threaten to overwhelm her. Using the same water imagery as she does in *The Waves*, she states that 'the only way I keep afloat is by working. […] Directly I stop working I feel that I am sinking down, down', in *Writer's Diary*, (p. 142). She also sees writing as a means of composing a unified sense of one's self: 'I thought, driving through Richmond last night, something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing', in *Writer's Diary*, (p. 202).

indicates that it is a process that means to unify. Something of Woolf and Lily's endeavour is realised here, as Bernard charges the concrete – 'a sudden phrase' – with his abstract vision, creating permanence in the face of flux, forging form out of formlessness.

When writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf recorded her struggle to find an image suitable for communicating her vision. She wrote,

> One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none, I think. […] Life is, soberly and accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. […] But by writing I don't reach anything.[125]

In *The Waves*, however, Bernard realises the fin as the very image Woolf had sought.[126] Documenting the completion of this novel, Woolf wrote that 'I mean that I have netted the fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to the end of *To the Lighthouse*."[127] The phrasing definitively aligns her accomplishment with Bernard's. In the novel, Bernard sees 'far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason' (p. 134). Like a 'good phrase', then, it has 'independent existence' (p. 50). 'Visual impressions', he continues, 'often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time to come uncover and coax into words' (p. 134). Set against the formless 'waste of water', the image of the fin, then, contains the essence of the vision Woolf/ Bernard wishes to convey. McNichol asserts that what Woolf is after is "the essence of reality", 'and the image that represents that for her is the "fin" passing far out at sea' (p. 120). Making a similar claim, Torgovnick points to the triangularity of the fin, labelling it an 'abstract composition' in which Woolf finds 'a fitting representation of what she called the "essence of reality", a universal,

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[125] *Writer's Diary*, p. 104.
[126] In *Painting and Poetry: Form, Metaphor, and the Language of Literature* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985), Franklin R. Rogers observes of this statement of 1926 that 'what Woolf does not realise at this stage is that she has already reached the image despite her assertion to the contrary. The image is, of course, in the sentence preceding the question: "One sees a fin passing far out"' (p. 77).
[127] Ibid., pp. 165 – 66.

oceanic sense that overarches the social, familial, time-bound reality in which individuals normally live' (p. 136). This image – the fin in the waste of water – perfectly illustrates the interplay of different types of abstraction in Woolf's vision. The waste of waters, we have seen, is a form of abstraction in its formlessness, its association with the inarticulate, and "otherness" to the concrete. The fin, as Torgovnick points out, is an 'abstract composition'. It is seen in isolation, and is therefore abstracted to a geometric shape, a triangle. The fin is a form of visual abstraction, one akin to the abstract movement in art. Just as abstract painters felt that the abstract image accessed something beyond the familiar – something more essential – the fin's suggestion of something below the surface, beyond perception, charges the image with more than it ostensibly signifies. Seen thus, it is the image Woolf finds to convey what she means, but cannot otherwise say.

Bernard uses the image of the fin to suggest the ineffable. Sitting with Neville, he describes how they 'sank into one of those silences which are now and again broken by a few words, as if a fin rose in the wastes of silence; and then the fin, the thought, sinks back into the depths, spreading round it a little ripple of satisfaction, content' (pp. 193 – 4). The fin is the manifestation of some abstract thought. Bernard finds the image satisfying, because it translates his vision into something tangible, drawing the invisible into something perceptible. Without the fin, 'there is nothing', only the 'immeasurable sea', only 'that leaden waste of waters' (p. 201 and p. 174). 'Life has destroyed me', says Bernard (p. 210). The abstract image is, for Bernard, essential for asserting something real, something concrete, against the 'nothingness' of the abstract surround.

Woolf's use of images in this novel suggests them as symbols. The repetition of images – rings, circles and loops, birds, bubbles, bees, a stamping beast, tiger, the fin, and so on – like Forster's wasp, impresses their importance, exaggerating their significance. They are certainly metaphoric, not literal, and each recurrence of an image supplies new "clues" for decoding what they symbolically intend. The birds of the interludes correlate to the development of the voices and their interaction with and independence of each another. As individuals become more pronounced, and the voices more distinctive, the

interlude corresponds saying 'each bird sang with passion, with vehemence, as if to let the song burst out of it, no matter if it shattered the song of another bird with harsh discord' (p. 78). Bernard confirms our suspicion that the birds of the interludes correspond to the voices of the major narrative when, a few pages on, he speaks of the latter as those 'who have sung like eager birds each his own song' (p. 88). It becomes difficult, then, to read the image of the birds as anything other than symbols for (and manifestations of) the voices. But calling the rhythm and repetition of images in *The Waves* symbolic is reductive, and misses one of the crucial functions they play in the weaving together of the book.

In a letter to Roger Fry in 1927, Woolf asserted that:

> I meant nothing by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. […] I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether its right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.[128]

She resists symbolism, and, if we look at them as abstract, so do her images.[129] The maintenance of a degree of ambiguity is essential for seeing how images function in the book. Even those that seem easily decipherable – the ring, for instance – are multivalent. Although symbolic of unity, its significance varies according to voice. In some instances it suggests unity, in others, however, isolation, autonomy, or loneliness. Whilst repetition of an image effects unity in the design of the text, it also distinguishes between the voices. As Woolf wrote in

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[128] It is notable that Woolf's definition of the symbol here seems to correspond to Forster's. As with the previous chapter, I am not referring here to the symbolism of the Symbolist Movement, rather, to an understanding of the symbol as a hardening, and a limitation. Letter to Roger Fry, 27th May 1927, *A Change in Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1923 – 1928*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson, 6 Vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1975 – 1980), III (1977) p. 385.

[129] Various critics have spoken of the controversial symbolism of *the Lighthouse*. In *Arguing With the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London: Routledge, 1989), Gillian Beer describes the book as a 'post-symbolist novel', writing that 'symbolism is both used and persistently brought into question' (p. 195). In *The Problem of Subject*, Minow-Pinkney describes the Lighthouse as 'a second-order symbol, a symbol of symbolism itself' (p. 84). Both these critics observe the symbolic quality of the novel, but are reluctant to commit to any static symbolic reading.

a letter the year *The Waves* was published: 'no views are true.'[130] It is important that these images are not reduced to symbols, as it is their lack of a fixed meaning which allows their simultaneous function: as a means of 'hold[ing] the design together', and as a method of achieving Woolf's multi-perspective 'mosaic.'[131]

Though he craves solidity, and, more than any voice in the novel, strives for unity, Bernard is against singularity. 'I am not one and simple', he says, 'I am complex and many'; 'I do not believe in separation. We are not single' (p. 55 and p. 49). His story-telling is, in a way, a means of acquiring an audience and assimilating the many perspectives he needs to compose a sense of himself: 'to be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people's eyes' (p. 83). The unifying image he keeps returning to in his summing-up – 'the globe of life' – is equally suited to his conception of himself; 'far from being hard and cold to the touch'; rather, 'it has walls of the thinnest air. If I press them all will burst' (p. 182). His appeal to certain images provides a way of merging parts into a whole, whilst maintaining a sense of distinction. Not only that, they allow him to achieve a sense of fixity in the face of flux, as well as preserving a certain ambiguity and fluidity. 'The truth', he admits, 'is that I am not one of those who find their satisfaction in one person, or in infinity. The private room bores me, also the sky. My being only glitters when all its facets are exposed to many people' (p. 132). Bernard's identity depends upon multiple perspectives; in a way, he fashions *himself* as one of his images, as a point at which separate perspectives converge, constantly refiguring him in accordance with their view: 'I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me' (p. 96). He is also careful to negotiate between a total abandonment to 'infinity', and an absolute fixity to 'one person', or a 'private room'. Again, it is the abstract quality of the images he uses – their multivalency and ambiguity – that help him to achieve this, as they manifest as concrete but are charged with some abstract thought.

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[130] Letter to Ethel Smyth, 7th April 1931, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1929 – 1931*, IV (1978) p. 304.

[131] '[…] every life shall have its voice – a mosaic', wrote Woolf of her initial vision of the ending, in *Writer's Diary*, p. 154.

Bernard's images expose the paradoxical make-up of Woolf's abstraction. Like the table of *To the Lighthouse*, the willow tree draws together disparate viewpoints, setting something concrete against formlessness. This 'tree alone resisted our eternal flux', he says,

> Its shower of falling branches, its creased and crooked bark had the effect of what remains outside our illusions yet cannot stay them, is changed by them for the moment, yet shows through stable, still, and with a sternness that our lives lack. Hence the comment it makes; the standard it supplies, and the reason why, as we flow and change, it seems to measure (p. 177 and p. 178).

Composed of contradictions, this passage reads like a riddle. This enigmatic quality is a defamiliarising; the tree is abstracted to a composite of qualities and effects. Observed from multiple perspectives, this singular image concentrates the focus of many. Each perspective impacts upon the image of the tree; it 'is changed by them for the moment'. Yet it serves as a constant, 'stable, still', in the face of the 'eternal flux' and indeterminacy of the voices. The abstracted image draws the vision of many into a single, concrete manifestation. Its lack of definite symbolism – its ambiguity – allows for the mosaic-like convergence of multiple-perspectives. It permits unification whilst admitting of an inherent fragmentation.

Abstraction in *The Waves*, then, is fundamentally paradoxical. The ebb and flow of the waves illustrates the novel's antagonistic dynamic. It oscillates between unity and separation, attachment and detachment, stasis and flux, solidity and fluidity.[132] Woolf's granite and rainbow, vision and design correspond to the double dynamic of *The Waves*. Banfield regards the double aspect of Woolf's writing as the convergence of her philosophical influences (Hume, Leslie Stephen, and Russell) and her artistic influences (Cézanne and Fry). 'The philosophical tradition' gave her 'the table', and Cézanne and Fry 'made art and philosophy's common object a kitchen table.' Banfield claims that 'Cézanne's genius' was one of

[132] Bernard highlights the movement of this antagonistic dynamic repeatedly in his summing-up, where he says, for example: 'opening and shutting, shutting and opening, with increasing hum and sturdiness, the haste and fever of youth are drawn into service until the whole being seems to expand in and out like the mainspring of the clock' (p. 183).

reconciliation, in his ability 'to create a single vision out of two realities, to unite the visible to the eyeless' (p. 258). In its simultaneous simplification and saturation, the abstract image supplies Woolf with a concrete manifestation of her abstract preoccupations: a design for her vision. Abstraction reconciles the opposites that compose Woolf's double vision. In the abstract poetics of *The Waves*, then, Woolf finally finds a language to 'say the simple things which are so tremendous' (p. 20).

Conclusion

I

Conrad, Forster, and Woolf developed an abstract style of writing in response to shifting concepts of truth and reality. To speak of the abstract (as Monroe C. Beardsley did) as 'the converse of "realistic"', is to risk misconstruing it as anti-realist. The stylistic innovations of these three authors are not an attempt to get away from the real. They are the manifest strategy for realising these authors' vision of reality. To understand the abstract aspects of these authors' writing, we must abandon Beardsley's and Worringer's definition of the abstract as the antithesis of the real, and turn toward Kandinsky's assertion that: 'Realism = Abstraction./ Abstraction = Realism.'[1] Abstraction in fiction is not the enemy of realism, it is a redefinition of it.

The intellectual developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century deeply undermined a dualistic vision of reality. When Virginia Woolf wrote of the problem facing Georgian writers (in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'), she figured it in terms of a dualism. The 'difficult task' confronting these authors was to find a means of reconciling the conflicting characterisations of the Victorians and the Russians, to negotiate between concrete detail and invisible essence. The dualisms that pervade 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' align the problem of the artist with the philosophical crisis of dualism. The dualistic frame that Woolf establishes in this essay is, in some ways, the blueprint for reading the 'double vision' of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf herself. With each of these authors, there is a sense that the framework of a dualism – concrete and metaphysical, visible and invisible – is crucial to rendering their vision of reality in literature. The abstract aspects of their writing are both contingent upon and a product of this dualistic frame.

The 'double vision' of each of these authors, then, roughly corresponds to the character of the traditional, philosophical concept of dualism. The *Narcissus*,

[1] 'Concerning the Spiritual', p. 162.

('a fragment detached from the earth') is situated in the 'immense', 'hazy', 'immortal sea'; the voices of *The Waves* are suspended in 'an invisible elastic net'.[2] In Forster the public life of 'telegrams and anger ' is challenged by the 'private life that holds out the mirror to infinity'; and Conrad's 'facts' and 'standard[s] of conduct' are compromised by 'ideas' and 'something else besides', 'something invisible, a directing spirit [...] that dwelt within.'[3] In each of the novels looked at here, binary opposites amass and abound, each aspect of which contributes to the character of an overarching dualistic frame. Set against the tangible quality of information, form, and fixity, is the intangibility of atmosphere, formlessness, and flux. The 'solid villa of red brick' is at certain points 'irradiated'.[4] In its most basic form, the double vision of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf is composed of the visible and invisible, the concrete and the metaphysical. This character aligns the dualisms of their writing with the compromised dualism of philosophy.

The 'double vision' of these authors separates their abstraction from some of the more extreme abstract experimentations of their contemporaries. Rather than total abandonment to abstraction, they strike a balance between the abstract aspects of their fiction and more conventional, familiar modes of representation. Peter Burra explained that Forster chose not to adopt a wholly abstract form because he had 'desires which need[ed] a more distinct articulation than' a total abstraction could 'make' (p. 311). All three of these authors require a marriage of the explicit and the abstract, so that they can simultaneously effect something of the aesthetic experience of reality, as well as articulating the 'causes' and concepts central to their philosophical vision.

Though scientific and philosophical developments had rendered dualism untenable, it could play a role, at least, in the realm of literature. Troubling each of these authors was the belief that 'facts' were somehow insufficient for communicating the fullness of being. A dualistic model provided both a means of expressing this anxiety and a strategy for overcoming it. In the wake of the scientific destabilisation of absolutes, Conrad believed that truth was not

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[2] *The 'Narcissus'*, p. 25 and p. 122; *To the Lighthouse*, p. 23.
[3] *Howards End*, p. 41 and p. 91; *Lord Jim*, p. 21 and p. 22.
[4] Woolf, 'The Novels of Forster', p. 108.

something stated, but rather something experienced. Forster declared that language that conveyed atmosphere was 'more real' than that which conveyed information. Woolf asked 'what image can I reach to convey what I mean?'. The *sense* of a novel, of course, depends upon the provision of information and the representation of the familiar. But the abstract experimentations of each of these authors added another dimension to their familiar and descriptive use of language. The abstraction in their fiction both exposes and goes beyond the limitations of conventional structures of meaning. It challenges and overwhelms the parameters of familiar forms. It is transcendental and amorphous, expansive and intangible. In their various abstract experimentations, these three authors engage with other concepts that "go beyond" conventional limitation, enriching our sense of what abstraction is. Conrad suggests the ineffable, and evokes images as indeterminate, obscure, metaphysical. Forster draws upon the mystical, and uses negative figuration to expand out from the familiar. Woolf surrounds the concrete with flux, formlessness, and a sense of infinity. Whilst the concept of a metaphysical "beyond" was increasingly unimaginable in contemporary thinking, in literature it becomes the means of exposing and challenging the hitherto accepted structures of meaning.

Although alike in character and construct to the dualism that philosophy and science had undermined, the double vision of these writers was not some nostalgic nod to the dualistic tradition. Each author utilised, and in some ways, reimagined that dualistic model for their own artistic ends. We ought, therefore, to appreciate their literary dualism as more than just a paean to or a yearning for a vanishing tradition and instead look upon it as a reinvention, and an innovation.

Of the three authors, Conrad and Forster's double vision corresponds most to a conventional dualistic model. They tend to situate the metaphysical aspect "out there", locating it beyond the realm of perception and limitation. Woolf, however, relocates the metaphysical aspect "in here", within the individual consciousness. Woolf's brand of dualism is distinctly divergent in its reconception of the metaphysical aspect as apprehensible rather than imperceptible. This situates the individual at the heart of inquiry, thus realising something of Woolf's

preoccupation with subjectivity and the communication of self. Though less radical than that of Woolf, the double vision of Conrad and Forster is also crucial for realising something fundamental to their vision. For Conrad, it weaves the fundamental tensions of his time – egoism and altruism, individual and society – into the very fabric and structure of his text. For Forster, dualism allows him to speak of the unspeakable, to articulate and overcome the ostensibly impossible in the context of Edwardian society. The double vision of these authors is not so much an attempt to sustain a dualistic tradition, rather, it proves the most effective model for conveying something crucial to their own vision.

The sense of expansion that abstraction effected in the writing of these three authors allowed them to convey 'something more' than an explicit, conventional mode of description allowed. Their desire for 'atmosphere', and not just 'information', corresponds, in some ways, to the refusal of certain contemporary thinkers to accept the material reality as the sum of all. Despite his acceptance of the shattering discoveries of physics, Arthur Balfour rejected the idea that science could account for the totality of existence. Religion, he wrote, is a principle which science 'requires for its own completion.'[5] Similarly, Alfred North Whitehead maintained the existence of a metaphysical religious aspect alongside of the material, scientific aspect. 'The fact of religious vision', claimed Whitehead, 'is our one ground for optimism. Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience' (p. 238). The metaphysical aspects of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf's dualism are certainly not intended as an implementation of religion or belief in a higher power. Rather, in the stead of the traditional receptacles of the spiritual – religion or mysticism – abstraction advances art as the purveyor of something akin to the spiritual experience. It allowed the individual a sense of expansion beyond the materiality of their existence. Heidegger once claimed that 'every era, every

[5] *Foundations of Belief*, p. 289.

human epoch, is sustained by some metaphysics.'[6] The expansive quality of abstraction satisfies that metaphysical urge.

II

Each of these authors sought what Conrad described as the 'incomprehensible alliance of irreconcilable antagonisms'. Banfield argues that 'Cézanne's genius was to create a single vision out of two realities, to unite the visible to the eyeless' (p. 258). I argue that Conrad, Forster, and Woolf use abstraction to achieve the same in their fiction. The abstract provides them with a design for reconciling the opposite forces of their double vision.

All three authors figure certain characters as a site for bringing together these opposites. Jim and Maurice are both narrated at the point of convergence between two antagonistic realms: the public and private, light and dark. Mrs Moore, Mrs Wilcox, and Mrs Ramsay draw the unseen into the seen: they imbue the familiar, tangible dimension with a sense of beyond. Woolf's depiction of Lily Briscoe figures the artist as caught between thought and expression, the metaphysical and tangible. Lily's quest for significant form in *To the Lighthouse* represents the quest of the artist: the need to find a design that will express their vision. Just as abstraction provides the means of doing this in Lily's painting, so it provides the means for reconciliation in the writing of these three authors.

For Lily (and, in certain instances, for Woolf too), reconciliation is wrought in the form of a visual, geometric abstraction. Other forms and types of abstraction, however, work to achieve the same ends. Conrad effects the discomfiture of his allied irreconcilable antagonisms via his mergence and exchange of conventional binaries. In certain scenes, for instance, he exchanges qualities usually associated with illumination with those usually associated with darkness, rendering the light as somehow superficial, and the dark, the locus and purveyor of truth. Forster also merges and exchanges conventionally opposed binaries as a

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[6] Cited in Alain Renaut, *The Era of the Individual: A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise and Franklin Philip, foreword by Alexander Nehamas (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 4 (first publ. in *Nietzsche*, by Martin Heidegger, III, p. 87).

means of effecting reconciliation and connection in his novels. His apparently inexplicable repetition of certain minutiae is another technique for knitting disparate aspects of a text together. Forster's abstractions encourage the reader to make connections in their reading, effecting a rhythmic process of unification. In addition to her use of abstract form for reconciliation, Woolf uses mundane objects to focus fragmented perspectives; the singular object is transformed into a site that converges and contains the visions of many. In other instances, familiar, tangible images are charged with a sense of communicating "something more" than what they ostensibly represent. In these images, the concrete object and the metaphysical vision collide. Each of these authors' methods for effecting a sense of reconciliation between the opposite elements of their vision is remarkably different. Nevertheless, each method is essentially some form of abstraction. Rather than dilute a sense of what abstraction is, this diversity attests to the rich variety of ways abstraction manifests in literature.

Each author uses abstraction as a means of anchoring the metaphysical aspect of their vision to something tangible. Conrad describes this process as 'rescue work', a 'snatching of vanishing phases of turbulence, disguised in fair words, out of the native obscurity into a light where struggling forms may be seen, seized upon, endowed with the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values […].'[7] This corresponds to Bernard's need to 'make phrases' in *The Waves*. Bernard's phrases give significant form to his sensorial impression. By 'netting' his impressions 'under with a sudden phrase' he, like Conrad, rescues them from the flux of daily existence, realising them as concrete and imbuing them with a sense of permanence (p. 134). For each of these authors, abstraction allowed them to infuse the visible with a sense of the invisible, to draw together antagonistic forces within a singular figure, object, or vision, and to realise a metaphysical concept within a concrete design.

[7] 'Henry James', p. 11.

III

The predicament facing writers like Conrad, Forster, and Woolf, was how to cope with certain philosophical issues in the context of their aesthetic. Reading the abstraction in their writing, then, necessarily involves a scrutiny of the relationship between literature and philosophy. In philosophy, abstraction tended to be thought of as a means of intellectually distancing oneself from the flux and formlessness of sensorial experience. In their strategy for responding to certain shifts in contemporary philosophy – from objectivity to subjectivity, absolute to relative – these three authors revise the concept of the abstract as illimitable and excessive, rather than limited and reductive. Instead of subscribing to the philosophical pursuit of knowledge, the abstraction in their writing instates aesthetic experience as the more crucial realisation of their particular vision of reality.

Conrad's alliance of irreconcilable antagonisms effects something of his belief that 'the only indisputable truth of life is our ignorance.'[8] The perpetual tension and stalemate that these allied antagonisms structure in his aesthetic realise the author's anxiety, his pessimism, and horror at the fundamental senselessness, the 'tragic accident' of interminable existence.[9] Forster's aesthetic promotes his more optimistic vision. The interminable oscillation between opposites in his writing is a source of truth, rather than an admission of a fundamental ignorance. Personal relationships were crucial to Forster's philosophy. The dualistic frame of his writing figures the relationship between oppositional aspects as essential to his aesthetic too. Forster uses abstraction to stimulate connection, thereby realising his philosophy and central ethos – 'only connect' – in the structure and aesthetic of his fiction. Woolf's use of abstraction speaks of the artist's struggle to reach for an image to convey what s/he means, the transmutation of their thought into expression. In her particular relocation of the metaphysical dimension to "in here", within the realm of consciousness, Woolf realises the subjective experience of the

[8] "The Inheritors." – A Letter from Joseph Conrad, 24th August 1901, *New York Times Archive*.
[9] Conrad, Letter to Cunninghame Graham, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, I, p. 216.

individual as central to her vision. By charging the concrete with the metaphysical, and crystallising flux into form, she enacts her 'moments of being' within the aesthetic experience of her writing.

Rather than "telling" us their philosophical preoccupations, each author demonstrates their particular philosophy by enacting it within the aesthetics of their writing. To some extent, then, abstraction - like Impressionism before it – shifts the emphasis from intellectual and cerebral apprehension toward aesthetic experience, from the objective to the subjective. But, though these stylistic innovations can legitimately be described as Impressionist, thinking of them as abstract allows for a fuller, more extensive apprehension and understanding of their 'double vision'. The abstract is, by its very nature, dualist. More so than Impressionism, the abstract necessitates a direct engagement with the aesthetic and conceptual dualisms of these novels. Not only does it allow each of these authors to express their philosophy within the fabric of their aesthetic, it draws the invisible into the frame of the visible. According to Clive Bell, Cézanne's great achievement was his discovery 'in what he saw' of 'a sublime architecture haunted by that Universal which informs every Particular' (p. 210). The abstract aspects of these authors' writing communicate two things at once, realising and reconciling their 'double vision'. They draw the unseen into the seen, infusing the physical with a sense of the metaphysical. The abstract imbues the vision of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf with a sense of "something more".

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